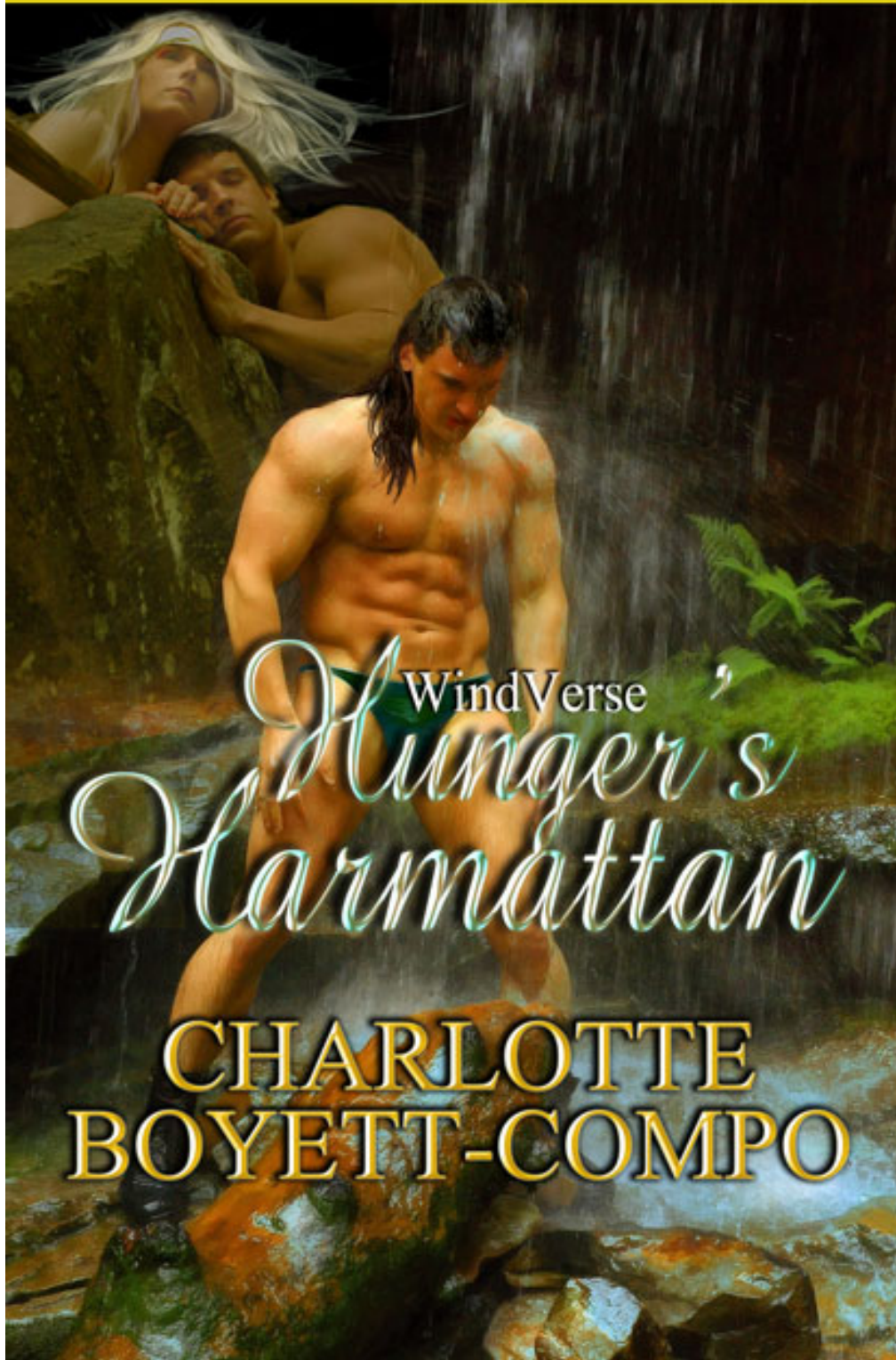


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Hunger's Harmattan

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HUNGER'S HARMATTAN

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Chapter One

Lieutenant Colonel Shanee Iphito glanced sideways at her image in the full-length mirror and she liked what she saw.

Her uniform tunic and trousers fit her perfectly with not one wrinkle or smudge on the slate gray serge fabric. Her black boots were polished to a high gloss and the brass anchors pinned to the collar of her tunic gleamed. Her fourragère—the braided black cord with a hanging brass tip that hung at her left shoulder—drew her eye and as it always did, made her heart swell with pride. The cord was given only to those Guardians who had been seriously wounded in action for it symbolized a hangman's rope and coffin nail. It was there to remind her that her life as a Primary Riezell Guardian could be forfeit at any moment.

Putting a hand to her sleek braided chignon to ensure no hair was out of place, she straightened her shoulders, ignoring the tug of pain that pulled at her arm.

"You pass muster, Iphito," she said to the mirror, chin lifted. She liked the way her white hair shone in the light and though her eyebrows were that same color, the natural darkness of her Amazeen complexion and the deep gray of her eyes only heightened her appearance. She knew she was a beautiful woman.

Pivoting with military precision, she left her quarters for her appointment with the new head of Command Central General Maximillian Strom.

Miriam Quillan glanced up as Shanee entered the office and frowned. She looked back down at the file she was reading. General Strom's secretary did not care for the Amazeen warrioress who had been given the coveted rank of Primary Riezell Guardian. Of all the Primes before her, Iphito alone rubbed Miriam the wrong way.

"I am here," Shanee announced, knowing her declaration would annoy the mousy little secretary.

"Take a seat," Miriam said through clenched teeth. "You'll have to wait."

Bristling at what she considered the secretary's insufficient respect for her rank and position, Shanee remained standing, folding her arms over her chest. Her gray eyes bore into the top of Miriam's head, and if the look the Amazeen directed Miriam's way could have killed, the secretary would have burst into flame.

Ignoring the other woman, Miriam made a notation in the file, laid it aside and picked up another just as the door to General Strom's office opened.

"What the hell's keeping you? Get your ass in here, Iphito," the general growled.

Shanee did not miss the humorous twitch of the secretary's lips. She narrowed her eyes to dangerous slits, and when Miriam looked up at her with a smug smile, the

Amazeen literally hissed at the other woman. She took a step toward Miriam only to have the general come out of his office and grab her arm in a hard grip.

"Stop that!" General Strom snapped. He pulled Shanee into his office and slammed the door behind her. "This animosity between the two of you women will stop. Today!" He released her arm.

Shanee snapped to attention. "Aye, aye, Sir!" she said, though her jaws were clenched tightly together—not merely from the anger she was feeling but because the man had aggravated the wound that had nearly cost her her life.

Strom cursed under his breath as he realized what he'd done. His blue eyes were stormy as he skirted his desk and sat down. "I did not mean to hurt you," he apologized.

"You did not, Sir!" Shanee stated.

"Liar," he countered then waved a hand toward one of four chairs sitting in front of his massive desk. "Sit down."

"Aye, aye, Sir!" Shanee sat down primly in the chair with her back ramrod straight, her knees and ankles pressed together, hands folded properly in her lap.

"At ease, Colonel," Strom said. "It's too late in the day for such rigid posturing and it pisses me off."

Shanee's shoulders sagged only a little in response to his order. "Aye, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

The general leaned back in his form-fitting chair and put his fingertips up to his temples where a nagging headache had been plaguing him all morning. "And drop that lame-ass military protocol. I'm not Alphon Morrison so I don't require having my ego stroked with all that bullshit." He made tiny circles against his temples with his index and middle fingers. "We will be working together and not against one another. Is that understood?"

Shanee relaxed, sitting back in the chair. She'd heard nothing but good things so far about the man who had taken over the reins of the Riezell Guardians though—like nearly everyone else—she knew very little about him or from where he'd come to assume the head of Command Central.

"Your shoulder is healing?" Strom asked.

"It is," she replied.

"Had that Gearmánach blade struck another few inches down, we wouldn't be having this conversation," he said.

"The Gearmánach wasn't as skilled as he thought he was," Shanee said.

"And paid for that mistake with his life," Strom said.

Shanee shrugged. The mission upon which she had been meant to die had been assigned to her by the man who had been interim head of Command Central. Apparently in league with what was now known as the New Coalition, General

Renaldo Sicar had sent the new Primary Riezell Guardian to *an Ghermáin* and into an ambush. Shanee had been sent to *an Ghermáin* to die.

"You do know Sicar was one of O'Shay's henchmen and the assassin as well?"

"I figured as much," she said with a sneer. "If that's the best he has, no wonder he's still running with his tail tucked between his legs."

Despite the throbbing pain in his temples, Strom chuckled. "He can run but eventually Bakari will run him to ground. It is simply a matter of time."

Shanee nodded. Ryden Bakari—the warrior who had temporarily resigned his position as Burgon of the Aduaidh Alliance—was on the trail of the man who had ordered the destruction of the Burgon's palace and who had caused the deaths of his family. Once his vengeance was completed, Bakari would return to his position as the supreme leader of the Alliance. Though another man held the title for the time being, out of respect for Bakari, he was still given the exalted designation by those who knew him.

"It's a good thing Morrison took his own life. I have no doubt with his newly enhanced abilities, the Burgon would have come after him," she said.

"Oh I know he would have," Strom said. "And drained Morrison as dry as aged parchment."

Shanee thought of Bakari and wondered what it must have been like to have a revenant worm placed inside him so he could become a Reaper—one of the most feared warriors in the megaverse.

"It is not pleasant," Strom said as if he'd read her mind, and when she gave him a quizzical look, he waved aside his remark and sat forward, his fingers threaded together on his desk. "Are you up for a new assignment?"

Shanee thought of the nasty wound in her shoulder that had been inflicted by the poisoned Gearmánach blade aimed at her heart. Though the cut had been painful and her recovery slow—more from the poison than the wound—it was now healing nicely with only a minor twinge now and again to remind her it was there. Knowing Sicar had been executed for his part in her near-death went a long way in helping her to get over the entire incident.

"I am not in top physical shape," she replied honestly, "but I am ready for reassignment."

"It's nothing dangerous," Strom said. "Actually, it's more along the lines of a vacation, if you will."

One perfectly tweezed white eyebrow lifted. "A vacation to where?"

"A veritable paradise if what I hear is true," the general replied.

A chime sounded and he looked up at the vid-com screen that was to the left of his desk. His secretary's pleasant face appeared.

"Vice-Counselor Jost and his wife are here, Sir," Miriam said.

"Would you ask them to wait just a moment, Miriam?" Strom asked.

"Certainly, Sir." Miriam's face faded from view.

"Do you know who Vice-Counselor Jost is?" the general asked Shanee.

"I believe he was the councilman whose life was saved from a Storian assassin by Major Neff," Shanee replied.

"Aye, he was and now he has been elected to the Riezell Conclave in a very prominent position of power," Strom said. "A position he has a tendency to abuse." A muscle flexed in his cheek. "Add to that his recent Joining to the widow of Duke Keifer Harmattan and you have the beginnings of a real problem."

Shanee was not familiar with the duke and said as much.

"Harmattan was a very rich and powerful man on Riezell," Strom explained. "He came from a very influential family whose wealth—I'm told—is so vast it would rival that of the Supreme Legare."

The Primary Riezell Guardian whistled beneath her breath. "That would be vast indeed."

"Harmattan was also an admiral with Fleet Academy, a highly decorated warrior who died during a battle over Diabolusia about twenty years ago. The *Abroholos*, the ship that he and his eldest son Ailyn were on, went down with no apparent survivors." He leaned back in his chair. "At least we didn't think there were any survivors but now we're not so sure."

Once more the chime of the vid-com intruded but the general didn't turn to look at the vid-com screen. "Aye, Miriam?"

"His excellency the vice-counselor wanted me to remind you he is waiting, Sir," Miriam reported.

"Tell him I am aware that is the case and am finishing briefing the Guardian who has been assigned to his case." He reached over and turned off the vid-com so there would be no further interruptions.

Shanee could not keep from smiling. She liked this new head of Central Command. He was a man after her own heart.

"Before I invite the impatient vice-counselor and his lady-wife to join us," Strom said, his face hard as flint, "I want you to know that Elspeth Harmattan-Jost is the reason you have been given this mission. It is to appease her that the vice-counselor has asked us to get involved in what is basically a Fleet Command problem. As you can imagine, being the widow of a national figure such as Kiefer Harmattan, she is not without influence of her own."

"I can imagine," Shanee said.

"The woman lost five sons to the war. Her surviving child was an ensign aboard Lord Taegin Drae's ship the *Revenge*. As you probably know, Lord Taegin resigned his commission and retired a few years back but during the situation concerning Rory Quinn, the Tiogar took over command of his old ship and when the state of affairs

ended, it was Drae's ship that took home to Theristes certain warriors who had aligned themselves with the Burgon."

"You mean the Reapers?" Shanee asked.

Strom nodded. Absently, he put his fingertips to his left temple. "It was during the time those warriors were on board the *Revenge* that young Harmattan swears he saw his eldest brother Ailyn."

"If that's true, then Ailyn Harmattan more than likely had been incarcerated on Riezell-Nine," Shanee said.

"And that means he is now a Reaper."

"Did the younger Harmattan speak to the man he believed to be his brother?"

"He..."

There was a very determined knock on the general's door and Strom's eyes flashed blue fire as he pushed his chair back and got to his feet. He stalked around the desk, jerked open the door to face a small man bedecked in the formal robes of a vice-counselor.

"General Strom, we do not have all day to sit in your outer office," the vice-counselor said. "As you know my lady-wife..."

"Come in," the general interrupted him. "I haven't finished my briefing but since you could not wait, you can fill Colonel Iphito in on the rest of what I would have given her!"

Not bothering to escort the vice-counselor and his wife into the office, Strom stomped back to his desk and took a seat. "Stay where you are, Iphito," he commanded as Shanee made to rise out of deference for a high government official.

Vice-Counselor Jost held out his hand to his wife and when the woman joined him in the doorway, Shanee was hard-pressed not to stare.

Elsbeth Harmattan-Jost was a weak, stooped woman whose flesh bore the unmistakable stamp of impending death. Her body quivered with palsy as she painfully made her way into the office and to the chair to which her husband led her. Sitting down gingerly, she cast Shanee a look that belied the older woman's apparent frailty. There was fire and brimstone in that glance and the frosty brown eyes that delivered them were filled with acute hatred.

Taken aback by the strength of that glare, any degree of compassion Shanee might have otherwise felt for the woman evaporated. She turned her attention back to the general whose gaze fused with her own. When he cocked one dark brow—mentally challenging his Prime's opinion—the Amazeen almost smiled.

"How much have you told her?" Vice-Counselor Jost demanded as he took a seat beside his wife.

"She had just asked if Ensign Harmattan got a chance to speak to the man he believed was his brother on the *Revenge*," Strom replied. "I did not get the chance to answer her."

"No, he did not," the vice-counselor stated. "Felix attempted to follow his brother but Ailyn lost him on the ship, seemingly vanishing for all intents and purposes."

"I've heard you can look right at a Reaper and not see him," Shanee declared.

Elsbeth Harmattan-Jost flinched. "Please, don't speak of my son in that way," she said, her voice soft but threaded with steel.

"How old is your younger son, Madame Jost?" Shanee asked.

"He is twenty-two," the vice-counselor answered for his wife.

"That would have made him two years old when his brother went down with their father?"

"What does that have to do with...?"

Shanee interrupted the vice-counselor. "How old was Ailyn Harmattan?"

"I don't..."

"He was just out of Fleet Academy," the vice-counselor's wife answered. "He was twenty-four."

"How is it possible your younger son recognized a man who disappeared when he was but a toddler?" the Primary Riezell Guardian inquired.

"Felix has seen Ailyn's portrait in the Grand Hall at Harmattan Manor all his life, Colonel," the ailing woman replied. "He says the man he saw on the *Revenge* was his brother and I believe him."

"Does he believe the man on the *Revenge* knew who he was?"

"He says he saw shocked recognition in the man's eyes and Felix believes that is why Ailyn hid from him," the vice-counselor snapped.

"But you don't know for a fact that it was Ailyn Harmattan on that ship," Strom stressed.

Elsbeth Harmattan-Jost turned a vicious glower to the general. "We don't know that it wasn't either. Felix spoke with many of those warriors from Theristes and although they would not confirm the man my son had seen was indeed Ailyn, neither did they deny it."

"What exactly is it you want me to do?" Shanee asked.

"We want you to go to Theristes and bring Ailyn home where he belongs," the vice-counselor snapped. "He is the duke of Kentsington, the rightful heir to the Harmattan fortune. He has obligations."

"Has it occurred to you that if the man on the *Revenge* is your son, he doesn't want to be brought back?" Shanee queried. "It is my understanding that none of the men who had been interred on R-9 wanted to return to their former lives though they were given the chance. They took the Burgon up on his offer to take them to Theristes, which they have made their new home. It was only out of loyalty and appreciation of what the Burgon had done for them that they left Theristes to help avenge the attack on Aduaidh Prime."

"It doesn't matter whether Ailyn wishes to return or not," Vice-Counselor Jost declared. "He has responsibilities. He..."

"I am dying, Colonel," the vice-counselor's wife cut in. "I have only a few short months to live. It would comfort me greatly to know my eldest child—the goddess help me, my favorite son—is alive and well. I ache to see him just once more before I leave this world." She took a white linen handkerchief from the pocket of her coat and blotted her upper lip. "Is that too much to ask?"

"This doesn't seem to me to be a matter for the Guardians," Shanee said. "Wouldn't it be better to turn the request over to Fleet Command? They have the resources to..."

"We want the best," Vice-Counselor Jost said. "The Guardians are the best. No expense is to be spared. My lady-wife and I will foot the entire bill from the leasing of an adequately prepared LRC to whatever other provisions you might need in the undertaking of your mission, Colonel." He raised his chin. "We have the blessing of the arch-counselor himself to undertake this rescue."

"Rescue?" Shanee questioned. "You are suggesting the target is being held against his will on Theristes."

"The target—as you so blithely call him—may be my son," the older woman sneered. "I want him home!"

Shanee and Strom watched the wife of the vice-counselor breakdown, putting her trembling hands over her eyes and sobbing wretchedly, her loud keening sharp and painful to the ear.

"Look what you have done!" the vice-counselor barked. "I shall report this to your superiors, General, I assure you!" He had gotten to his feet and was hovering over his wife, patting her back, speaking to her as though she were a distraught child instead of a grown woman.

Shanee's attention shifted to the general. Strom was frowning sharply, his jaw tense, his eyes hard as ice.

"Come, my love," Vice-Counselor Jost said, helping his lady-wife to her feet. "Let me take you back to our quarters so you may rest. I will deal with this in your stead."

"I need my boy home, Laverne," Elspeth Harmattan-Jost whimpered. "Please bring my boy home to me."

"Now, now, sweeting," the little man consoled her. "Please don't fret. They'll bring Ailyn home." He turned at the door and gave Strom a fierce look. "I promise you they will bring your son home to Riezell."

After the vice-counselor and his sobbing wife had left his office, Miriam came over to the general's door and eased it shut, giving her boss a pursed lip, rolling eye grimace as she did.

"So," Strom said, relaxing in his chair. "What do you think, Colonel?"

"I believe the woman missed her calling," Shanee replied. "She should have been an actress."

Strom smiled slightly. "You didn't buy her tears?"

"Those were crocodile tears, Sir," Shanee said with a snort. "Shed to impress us with a sorrow I seriously doubt she feels toward her missing son."

"My feelings exactly," Strom agreed. "My guess is she wants him home in order to gain access to the rather hefty inheritance the duke of Kentsington would receive from the Harmattan estate." He scratched his cheek. "Since no body was ever found, the bulk of the estate reserved for the primary heir still sits in an *Éilvéiseach* numbered account, the password to which is known only by Ailyn Harmattan."

"Since she is not long for this life, she might not need or want her missing son's money but I would lay odds the vice-counselor does and has been nudging her through this," Shanee said.

"Or her youngest son does," Strom injected.

"True."

"All right, here's the deal," the general said. "I have requisitioned an LRC for your use to Theristes. It's about a month's flight out there, another month back. Since you were injured in the line of duty and Command Central owes you some R&R, take it on Theristes. I won't expect you back for at least three months."

Shanee's white eyebrows shifted upward. "With or without the heir-apparent?"

"My guess is he's like the rest of those poor wretches who were experimented on at R-9. From what I've been able to gather, most of them fear what they have become and don't want their families to know they're still alive. I'll bet you Ailyn Harmattan has no desire to return to this world. So—to answer your question—if he wants to return, fine. If he doesn't, that's okay too. We'll leave it entirely up to him. If he wants to send the password back with you for that numbered account, that will be his decision to make. If he wants to see his mother one last time before she kicks the bucket, that's his choice. My feeling is the man's gone through enough as it is. He doesn't need to be put through the wringer with that barracuda of a mother cracking the whip over his head." He unfolded his tall length from the chair and stood.

"When do I leave?" Shanee asked as she got to her feet.

"Do you have anything on the burner that needs turning off?" he asked.

"I've no living pets, no plants and no pals to wonder where I've gone. My twin babies are powered down and can stay so indefinitely until I return. I can leave as soon as I pack a bag," she said, making reference to her two Class 10 titanium construct cybots that were her pride and joy.

"That's the way to travel," he said, extending a hand to her. "Good luck, Colonel, and enjoy your stay in paradise."

Chapter Two

Coming off Transition had to be worse than going into it, the Reaper thought as he hunkered down at the stream and looked at his naked reflection in the water. Why he'd felt the need to shift and run about the forest like one of its natural denizens, he couldn't explain. But now and again he would do so out of cycle just to feel the rush of the wind through his fur, the freedom of movement, the power. Staring at himself, he supposed one reason was because he had some control over the Transition at such times whereas with his regular cycle, he did not. What irritated him more than that lack of control was the fact that no matter how close to his cycle he was when he forced himself to shift, he'd shift again when his system said he should. Two months, two weeks, two days—it didn't matter. His normal cycle would come whether he wanted it to or not. The only thing that could completely throw it off—or so Tariq once told him—was illness or a serious injury.

"Either way, my fucking hair will continue to sprout like a weed!" he grumbled.

His hair hadn't been cut since he'd arrived on Theristes and now hung halfway down his back. Each time he reverted back to human form from the wolflike creature he had been turned into, it was his hair that annoyed him the most. It was wild—frizzing around his head with matted tangles clinging to its long tendrils.

"You need to cut the gods-be-damned shit," he mumbled to his wavering image in the water.

Snarling, he ducked his head beneath the water to soak his hair then straightened up, flinging the thick, wet mass over his head, spraying water droplets in an arc above and behind him as it fell heavily to slap against his bare back. Wincing at the feel, he tugged it over his right shoulder, sat down cross-legged on the stream bank and began combing his fingers through the tangles then making quick work of braiding it.

For the longest time he just sat there. His body twitched—needing the tenses that would calm it and the Sustenance that would ease his hunger. He longed to dive into the stream but there was still the residual fear that he'd drown and the nagging prickle of pain in his back from the hellion who dared him to test Tariq's words.

"*You won't drown, men,*" the Prime Reaper had patiently explained. "*It was a lie told to you by the scientists on Riezell-Nine. Let me show you.*"

Despite watching Tariq jackknife down the three-hundred-foot-high waterfall beside the Reaper village and—with sure strokes—glide over the bubbling waters of Lake Briza, few men rescued from R-9 had dared to venture into the water. Those who did practically lived in the lake, spending much of their time crisscrossing the silver surface and striving to bring back the many years they'd lost in the cages on Cell Block Four.

"Reapers love water," Tariq had insisted. *"Try it and see!"*

As yet, he had not dredged up the courage to investigate Tariq's claims but the water beckoned to him with its coolness and beauty. As a child, he had lived on his grandfather's estate and every summer day would find him out on the diving platform in the middle of Lake Taku, nearly half a mile from shore. There wasn't a single foot of the lake's bottom he had not explored, holding his breath longer than any of his friends as he shot beneath the rippling waves.

"You are our water baby," his grandmother had joked.

At Fleet Academy he had been the captain of the swim team and had won every medal offered many times over. His senior year he had represented his country in the Coalition of Federated Worlds Universal Games held in Bhreatain and had come away with fourteen gold medals—the most any swimmer had ever won.

Now, he thought as he sat looking at his rippling reflection, all he could do was stare hungrily at the water, trying day by day to find the courage needed to dive into the water.

A sharp, agonizing pain stabbed into his right kidney and he bent forward over it.

"Leave me alone. I'm not going to jump in," he whispered to his queen. Her jagged bite pierced him once more then faded away.

He heard the ship before he saw it. It was a low drone that shook the ground beneath his bare rump and when he looked up at the sleek silver belly of the Class 7 LRC as it sailed past overhead, he felt strong vibrations coming from it that made his testicles tighten.

Getting to his feet, he watched the ship, tracked it with his amber gaze, until it disappeared momentarily behind the tall canopy of the trees. With his eyes trained on the high summit of Mount Korak, the LRC came back into view and soared over what the inhabitants of Theristes called the Wings of the Raven—the two-mountain range that had formed in the shape of a giant flying bird, its wings arched gracefully from a tall central peak that resembled a bird's beak in profile. The striations down the two mountains caused by the winds looked like feathers carved in rock.

As the long-range cruiser glided down behind Mount Korak, the Reaper stood there for a moment longer. His heart was thudding painfully in his chest. He knew whoever was on that ship had come to Theristes for him. His fate awaited there. For good or bad, his knew his life was about to be disrupted still again.

* * * * *

Shanee was stunned at the beauty of the people gathering on the grassy veldt to welcome them to Theristes. Not a stitch of clothing in sight, these gorgeous humanoids seemed unconcerned with their nakedness and genuinely pleased they had visitors. They were smiling, waving—long limbs gleaming in the sun, lush breasts jiggling, heavy genitals bobbing...

"Stop!" Shanee ordered her imagination as she stared in openmouthed wonder at the tall man who had stepped forward to greet them.

"That is Tariq," the captain of the LRC *Midian* told her. "He is the Prime Reaper, the leader of his people." He lowered his voice. "And a captive on R-9 for..."

"Over fifty years," Shanee said. She'd done her homework and she knew all about the man the Alliance scientists had called the djinn. She also knew the statuesque white-haired beauty at his side was his lady-wife Bahiya.

It was Bahiya who held Shanee's attention. Though she'd seen other women with white hair like her own, those women had been well past their prime, into their golden years. Never had she seen another of her thirty-odd years with such hair. And the Reaper's woman was tall and lithe and perfectly proportioned. Standing beside her husband, they were the most beautiful people Shanee had ever seen. Not even Rory Quinn could hold a candle to Tariq. The Reaper was prime indeed.

Shanee saw the Prime Reaper grin and his gaze met hers. She blushed—knowing he had intercepted her wayward thought. Her face felt as though she had opened the door to a fiery furnace and stuck her head inside.

"Welcome, Captain Bartlett," Tariq said, coming toward them with his hand out. As he grasped the captain's forearm in a strong grip, his eyes slid playfully to Shanee. "And a most gracious welcome to you, Lieutenant Colonel Iphito."

As soon as his hand gripped her arm, Shanee could feel the strength of power that ran through this man. He was intensely sensual with his handsome features and all-seeing eyes, but it was the undercurrent of authority that passed from his body to hers. She knew this man would make a formidable opponent.

"There is no conflict here, Colonel," Tariq said. "You and I will become good friends."

Shanee blinked. "You believe so?" she asked, casting a quick look to the stunning woman at the Prime Reaper's side.

"I know so," he said. "Your fate lies here on Theristes." He looked down at his wife. "Doesn't it, beloved?"

Bahiya nodded. "It does." She stepped forward and stunned Shanee by embracing her as a sister or mother would. "Welcome, sister."

Shanee had never been hugged by anyone except in a moment of careless passion. Her own ken did not behave in such a fashion and it embarrassed her for a moment before she realized that the friendship offered by Bahiya and her mate was genuine and extended without expectation of anything but its return in kind.

"You have come to speak to Ailyn," Tariq said.

Once more Shanee was taken aback. She hadn't known word had been sent to Theristes in preparation for her arrival.

"Reapers know these things, Shanee," Tariq declared then lifted an eyebrow. "May I call you by your given name?"

"Aye," Shanee said, lost in the golden sparkles flashing in his kind eyes.

"I am Tariq and this is Bahiya, as you know, and these are our people."

Shanee nodded to the beautiful crowd who was gathered around them.

"So he *is* here?" she asked to hide her embarrassment for her recalcitrant glance had dipped to Tariq's very well-endowed package.

"He is and he knows you have come to see him. His abode is beyond Mount Korak and the way is perilous after nightfall. I suggest you stay here for the remainder of the day, meet our people and eat with us. Tomorrow I will have someone lead you to Ailyn."

She turned to the yeoman who had accompanied her from the ship. "Tell the captain to let General Strom know Lieutenant Harmattan is here and that I will be speaking to him tomorrow."

"Aye, aye, Ma'am," the yeoman said. He turned to head back to the ship.

"You will be spending time with us, Shanee?" Tariq asked. "A month of rest?"

"Aye," she said, staring into his eyes.

"You will call to that man and tell him to bid the captain return in one month's time. Tell him you will send a report on Ailyn then."

Shanee found herself nodding, agreeing with Tariq, intrigued by the golden glints in his amber eyes, and did as he said. His voice was soothing, mellow, sensual, and what he said made perfect sense. There was no disagreeing with his words. It would only be later as she lay upon the soft mattress in his and Bahiya's hut that she would realize he had been using subliminals on her as easily as taking a breath. By then it was too late for the LRC had left and she realized with shock that she was stranded on Theristes without a vid-com link.

"How did you do that?" she snapped at Tariq. "You made me forget about all contact with my superiors and..."

"All Reapers know how to do these things, Shanee," he told her that next morning.

Be careful when you meet Ailyn Harmattan then, she warned herself as she trekked through the jungle behind her guide, a very shy and gangly youth named Barat. Out of consideration for her, Tariq had bid the young man to clothe himself and it was evident with every step he took that Barat was chafing under the fabric he was unaccustomed to wearing. He was carrying her compact travel bag and for that she was very grateful.

The jungle was lush and green and smelled—not of fecund earth—but of exotic flowers and fresh spring waters. Extraordinary birds of every hue under the rainbow flitted through the overhanging branches of the tallest trees Shanee had ever seen. Unusual animals swung from vine to vine or leapt from branch to branch, keeping pace with the two humans walking through this striking domain. Strange sounds wafted through the air—some comical, some unsettling.

"How much farther?" she asked.

"Less than one hour," Barat replied.

They were skirting a meandering stream into which a fan-shaped waterfall cascaded. Large white flowers grew in lush abundance on the banks of the stream and lent a heavenly scent to the already sweet, intoxicating air. Thick grass covered the banks and with the rippling of the stream over sparkling boulders in the water, it was a serene place, an astonishing little piece of heaven set down in the midst of the jungle.

Shanee was not used to the intense heat and humidity. No wonder the people of Theristes preferred to go “sky clad” as Bahiya called it. Already perspiring heavily in this tropical climate, she arched the sweat from her forehead and stopped long enough to take out her bottle of water. Tipping it up, she drank deeply.

“I will take it from here, Barat.”

It was not the softness of the voice speaking but the sultry quality of it that washed through Shanee as though the water she was consuming were iced and not tepid. She slowly lowered the bottle and turned her head to take in the speaker.

Rory Quinn had not been Shanee’s first man nor had he been her last when their brief interlude ended. She had lain with enough males, enjoyed her romps with them, but not even Quinn had ever made her womb clench and her juices flow as did the man who had suddenly appeared there in the jungle.

Handsome did not adequately describe the tall, muscular male who wore only an abbreviated breechclout over his hips. His long legs—like the rest of his spectacular body—were deeply tanned and so perfectly formed his creation had to be at the hands of the goddess Herself. Gleaming black hair in the form of a thick braid lay over his shoulder but tendrils had escaped the careless plaiting to curl gently around his face. Eyes the color of topaz gems were framed behind long, sooty eyelashes and sexily arched thick brows. His lips were full, perfectly shaped, and his nose was in perfect proportion and size for his face. With high cheekbones, a deep cleft in his chin and—by the goddess!—dimples when he smiled, he was a living, breathing god himself come to earth.

Shanee became aware of Barat hurrying back the way they’d come, stripping off his offending clothing as he walked. “T-thank you, Barat,” she managed to say, her gaze never leaving the man in front of her.

Reluctantly her attention went from his faultless form to the tall spear he carried as though it were a natural extension of his powerful physique. She was reminded of tales of ancient legendary warriors from such places as *an Éigipt* and *an Ghréig*

“Ailyn Harmattan?” she asked, picking up her travel bag.

“Aye. Come, little Amazeen,” he said, and held out his hand.

Almost as though in a trance, she dropped the water bottle and moved toward him. “You know who I am?” she asked as she slipped her hand in his. The moment her flesh touched his, she knew she was lost.

“I have been reading your thoughts since you crossed the stream near the Rain Tree,” he replied. “Is your bag too heavy for you to carry? If so, I will carry it for you.”

“No,” she mumbled. “I’m good.”

He glanced down at her. "Not always I would imagine."

Shanee blushed beneath that penetrating amber gaze and could have kicked herself for showing such a feminine weakness. With his firm grip surrounding her fingers, he led her down the path and away from the beautiful stream. She looked back longingly at its inviting waters and sighed.

"You are hot and the water beckons," he said in his mesmerizing voice.

"I would love to take a swim," she said, and was stunned that her voice had taken on a low, very feminine quality.

"When we reach my home, you can do that," he said.

She was keenly aware of his physicality as they walked. He was barefoot and looking down at his feet, she realized that everything she could see of his was absolute perfection—even down to his toes.

His hand tightening around hers and her face flamed. She knew he had intercepted that silly thought.

"Have you news of the Burgon?" he asked as he used his tall spear to push aside broad leaves for her to pass under their emerald umbrella.

Shanee had to swallow before she answered for her mouth had gone dry as dust. "The last we heard he was in the Aneas Quadrant."

"He'll catch his quarry," he said evenly. "Reapers always do."

"I would not like to be O'Shay," she said.

"Nor would I," he replied.

It was to a cave that he led her. Outside the sweeping archway luxuriant foliage grew up to the dark gray stone and vines curled downward to hang like swags over the entrance.

"You live in a cave?" she asked, and when he laughed, she felt that laugh to the very pit of her womb.

"Don't judge yet, *mo ionúin*," he chastised her.

A ripple of pure pleasure went through Shanee at his use of the Gaelachuan form of endearment. His calling her his beloved did strange things inside her, setting her heart to fluttering.

They walked under the hanging vines and into darkness. He halted her, bidding her to give her eyes time to adjust to the change. As they stood there so quietly, so still, his fingers caressing hers in that powerful grip, she became aware of his heady male scent and it began to play havoc with her senses.

"Can you see the light there?" he asked softly.

Shanee could make out a faint glow to the rear of the cave entrance. "Aye."

He tugged lightly on her hand and they began moving down a long stone corridor toward the source of that flicker of illumination. With every step she took, she knew she

was going deeper below ground. Normally that would have concerned her, made her uneasy, but with her hand tucked safely in Aliyn's, she felt no claustrophobic anxiety.

Within the stillness of the cave, she could hear the whistle of wind and feel it plying gently over her face. It was warm but wasn't unpleasantly so. The closer they came to the light, the louder the sound of the wind and along with it the unmistakable resonance of falling water.

"Is there a waterfall within the cave?" she asked, hearing the eagerness in her voice.

"You'll see."

It was growing brighter and by the time they came to a turn in the corridor partitioned off by a massive jutting stone, she could smell the wild exotic flower scents that had so intrigued her in the jungle as well as the faint tang of saltwater.

He guided her around the stone and into a fairyland of such raw natural beauty and overpowering sensual delight, she gasped, her eyes going wide.

The walls surrounding this subterranean chamber seem to ooze with blood red limestone stalactite. Fantastical twisted, gnarled and chiseled cones extended from the immense high ceiling alongside thick tree roots, both of which appeared to be arching their stone and fibrous fingers toward the green glowing pool of water that stretched around this hidden room, its waters lapping gently against a pebble-strewn beach. A shaft of light speared downward from the dark canopy of rock to shed wavering beams of light upon the undulating waters. To one side a waterfall poured its dark waters into the vast pool.

"The Diabolusians call this a *cenote*," he explained to her as he leaned his spear against one craggy wall. He pointed to the tree roots. "They pierce the ceiling in search of water."

She saw his pallet laid out beside the gently rippling water. "What a glorious place in which to live," she whispered.

"I like the serenity of it and it is as close to the water as I can get."

She glanced up at him. The low light in the chamber played seductively across his face, swirling shadows over the handsome plains and passing now and again through his topaz irises.

"Reapers cannot go into running water, can they?" she asked, remembering something she had read in the report on the men who had been created at Riezell-Nine.

"Actually they can," he said softly, "but I've yet to attempt it." A slight smile tugged at his lips. "That was just one of many lies the scientists fed us on R-9." He let go of her hand. "Why don't you test the waters in the pool, little Amazeen?" He hunkered down at her feet. "Give me your foot."

It was almost as though she had no will, no mind of her own. She lifted her foot and watched as he pulled off her boot, her sock. Obediently she lifted her other leg. The soles of her feet tingled as they touched the damp stones. She gazed down at him as he knelt there looking up at her and felt her heart thudding almost painfully in her chest.

"The water is cool," he said in a husky voice. "It comes from a deep subterranean well."

She found herself unbuttoning her uniform tunic, peeling it from her shoulders. Pushing her trousers down her hips, stepping out of them. Without thought, without a single moment of shyness or restraint, she unhooked her bra and let it fall away. She slid her panties off and stood there revealed to him in all her unadorned defenselessness.

Ailyn was on his knees before her and reached up to push his hands from the sides of her thighs and around her neatly turned rump to cup those firm cheeks. He pulled her toward him and when his mouth touched her core, Shanee let her head fall back, closing her eyes to the perfect pleasure his lips wrought.

The sweep of his tongue, the thrust of it, the absolute heaven of his warm breath fanning over the wiry curls at the juncture of her thighs, the slick, wet feel of his tongue parting her cleft and slipping inside her channel made her shudder from head to toe. Her hands went to his sleek black hair and she held his head against her, breathing deeply then more shallowly as he increased his rhythm, the movement of his tongue. He was lapping at her, nibbling, pressing, flicking, and when she came, she came with a trill of release that echoed through the stone chamber and came back at her.

Shanee was trembling, her heart pounding, the blood rushing through her ears and her body felt strung as tightly as a new bow. Her release had been momentary and already she wanted his touch again, the feel of her climax rippling through her once more.

"Cool yourself in the pool," he invited, letting his hands slide from her. "We have all the time in the world, *ionúin*."

As though in a trance she stepped back and walked toward the milky green glow of the waters. So unlike the skilled warriorress she was, she didn't ask about the depth of the pool. She didn't inquire of creatures that might be lurking in its deepness. She did not question how she knew to step up upon a broad flat area and then jackknife her body below the rippling surface.

The waters were sheer paradise—cooling, soothing, washing away the sweat and grime of her trek through the jungle. Beneath the plane of the water's expanse, the light turned the waters to a mystical shade of green. She cut through that glorious color like a fish for nearly two full minutes and when she broke the surface at last to gulp air into her depleted lungs, she was amazed anew at the absolute beauty of her surroundings.

Her hair had come free of its tightly controlled chignon and now hung behind her, floating in the water.

"Like it?" he asked. He was sitting on the rock from which she'd dived with his bare feet dangling over the edge. Beneath the hem of the breechclout, she could see his privates and a tingle of pure lust drove straight through her lower body.

"Join me," she said, and hardly recognized her husky voice.

He hesitated for a moment then got to his feet, stripped the breechclout from his hips and arched into the water like the champion she knew he'd been from reading his file.

Though acute pain had clawed at his back as he dared to go against his hellion, the moment he entered the water, his queen released her tight control on him, without doubt feeling the exhilaration and pleasure he was experiencing at being in the water after so long a time denied its soothing delights.

The pool was deep and Shanee treaded water as she watched him cut through the water with purpose, his powerful strokes pulling him along. She could see the muscles bunching in his upper arms, his shoulders, and now and then a glimpse of his perfect backside made her lick her lips.

Oh how she wanted this man! she thought as she watched him dive deep below the surface. She ached between her legs with such fiery need she wanted to drag him out of the water, stake him upon the crushed pebbles and straddle him, impaling herself as deep as he could go. She longed to taste him, to feel the weight of his body pressing down on hers, the hot warmth of his hands and mouth on her breasts.

When he shot up right in front of her—his body sliding sensually against hers, his strong legs churning the water—she had no other thought in her head than to lift her legs and lock them around his hips, her arms around his neck, flattening her breasts to his broad chest.

He never faltered, never even batted an eye. He just stretched out on his lean flanks and moved backward in the water, his arms pulling them toward the shore until his feet could touch the sloped bottom of the pool. His cock rested along the cleft of her ass and it was hard and thick and hot, pulsing now and then against her.

"I want you," she said as he turned and walked with her out of the water.

"I know."

It had not been said arrogantly or with conceit but as an acceptance of her need that matched his. When he carried her to his pallet and knelt down to allow her to lie on her back on that soft expanse, she did not break her hold on him, and he stretched out atop her, his weight a heavenly burden that sent shivers of delight through her groin. He touched the wound that marred her shoulder.

"Who did this?" he asked, anger leaping in his amber gaze.

"A dead man," she answered.

He held her gaze for a long moment then lowered his head to the wound and kissed it gently, laving it with his tongue. As he did, his cock leapt against her.

She wriggled against him, wanting that delicious cock inside her, but when he shook his head, she wanted to scream. "Why not?"

He smiled gently and put his hands to either side of her face. "Because you are ovulating, *ionúin*, and I would not give you a child until we are legally joined as man and wife. I want no bastard son of ours to ever feel the disapproval of his peers."

From all the reading she had done about the men who had been experimented on at R-9, Shanee knew Reapers mated only once in their lives. No other woman would ever know the power and thrust of them. They would allow no other man to have what was theirs. She knew when Ailyn Harmattan took her, he would be the last man she would ever allow that right.

"You must be sure it is I you want, little Amazeen," he said, looking down into her eyes.

"Am I what you want?" she asked, staring at his sensual mouth.

He stroked his thumbs over her cheekbones. "Morrigunia Herself sent you to me. I've no doubt in my mind about that. Can you not feel Her hand in this?"

Shanee knew they shared the goddess in common in their religions but she'd never thought much about such things. Though she gave lip service to the deities, she had never really believed in Their existence or Their supposed power to sway fate. At that moment though, she believed.

"Of all the women in the megaverse who could have been sent here, it was you who came," he said. "I felt the pull as soon as your ship sailed overhead. I didn't know what awaited me or who, but I knew my life would never be the same again. I accepted that the moment I felt your thoughts last eve."

"We could be all wrong for one another," she said, trying to be a responsible adult.

"You don't believe that and neither do I," he said, and lowered his mouth to hers.

As experienced as she was, Shanee had never known a kiss could be so enthralling, so devastating and so powerful that it literally made her toes curl. His mouth was a warm haven into which her very soul sank as he drew upon her lips. She throbbed in places she didn't even know she had and such a powerful sense of rightness with this man passed over her that she melted into his embrace.

"I want... I need..."

"I know what you need, *ionúin*. Let me provide it."

He eased off her to lie beside her, sliding his hand to her silken curls as he bent over and claimed her breast between his lips. His fingers—first one then two then three—slid into her warm sheath and began a deep, penetrating rhythm while his thumb grazed her swollen clit.

She writhed on the pallet, her hips arching up to meet his sure strokes. Her breast tingled where his mouth plied it. He went deep, held and then slowly withdrew, going deeper still when she groaned. He twisted his fingers gently inside her moist box until he found that mysterious spot that drew him like a magnet.

The moment he touched that button within her, Shanee bore down on his fingers and wrapped her arms around his neck to press his mouth firmer over her breast. His teeth were grazing her nipple, plucking at it, grinding it tenderly, and she was on fire with a lust that sent waves of heat coursing through her entire body.

"Ailyn," she said, and the word was a pleading, a begging and a needing that set his own soul aflame.

He pressed deeply into her, suckled her nipple hard, stabbed its swollen tip with his tongue and felt the ripples of pleasure undulating through her moistness.

"Ailyn!" she shouted, her body quivering as wave after wave of intense pleasure moved through her. She rode that concentrated tickle, ground against it, pushed up toward it and it seemed to go on and on and on until she couldn't take the enjoyment any longer. "Stop. Stop!"

Very slowly he withdrew his fingers and with his gaze fused with her half-lidded, sated one, he brought those fingers to his mouth to lick away her juices, to taste her, to revel in her spilled passion.

She drew in a harsh breath as she watched him. Never had she seen anything so carnal, so forceful. It sent ripples of desire through her, igniting her senses. Her breathing was so erratic she thought she might pass out from the sheer intensity of the passion that had rocked her to her foundation.

When every bit of her moistness was gone from his flesh, he smiled lazily at her. "Want to taste me now?" he asked in a deep, throaty growl.

"Aye," she said, and sprang up and over him with such fierce purpose she surprised him. His laugh was all the goading she needed to position herself between his legs—her knees spreading his thighs farther apart—and sit back on her haunches to stare down at the perfection of his hard cock.

His was larger than any man's she'd ever seen. Even Tariq seemed small in comparison and she thought that man's root to be massive when she'd surreptitiously ogled it. Ailyn's shaft was long and thick with prominent veins running along its length. The glistening head was darker than and as soft as a baby's ass when she touched it with the tip of her finger. His sac was full and pendulous as she slid her hand beneath him to heft the weight of those hairy orbs.

"You should be sculpted," she said in awe. "At the very least painted."

He stretched out his arm so he could trail his fingers down her breast. "Paint me with your saliva, *ionúin*. That will be art enough for me."

Completely amazed, her hand shook as she wrapped her fingers around his erect length, she was further stunned to find she could not encircle that straining flesh completely within the span of her closed grip. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. Her eyes met his.

"When the time comes, it will fit," he told her.

"I'm not so sure," she said breathlessly.

"I will stretch you on me, little Amazeen," he said. "And I will seat myself so deep in your cunt you won't want me to withdraw."

She had no doubt of that. Just staring down at that magnificent rod made her insides quake with a need so powerful she thought she well might come with him in her hand.

"I'll never get all of this down my throat," she said. He was so long she could put both hands around him.

"Probably not, but you can try," he said with a wag of his thick black brows.

And try she did, bending over him to take the head between her lips. Her jaws reacted to the stretching as she suckled him. She relaxed her throat and slid him as far into her mouth as she could without gagging and didn't begin to touch the base of that huge shaft. She pulled him out, swirled her tongue over his slit, suckled him, drew on his head and lowered her lips over him once again with her hands twisting gently, alternately in opposite directions.

Ailyn cupped her head between his hands and lifted his hips so she didn't have to bend over too far. He bent his knees and pressed them against her shoulders, widening his legs even farther for her.

He tasted salty and spicy at the same time and she wondered what he had eaten to give his juice that piquant flavor. It was not in the least offensive but rather aphrodisiacal and it was playing hell with her need to have him inside her.

"Easy, sweeting," he whispered. "It has been a long time since I've had a woman pleasure me and I am ripe to bursting."

She pulled away from him and looked up. "Then come, my warrior," she said. "Come hard and come long. I am ready for you."

Ailyn's body shuddered at her words and as soon as her mouth closed over him again, he spilled his seed into her waiting mouth, flowing down her relaxed throat, and shivering as though with the ague as she swallowed his essence—her tongue and the roof of her mouth milking him of every last spurt. He experienced such a strong climax, such a thoroughly exhilarating fulfillment, he doubted it could have been any better.

It had been over twenty years since Ailyn Harmattan had lain with a woman. The last time had been on his father's ship in a stolen moment with a yeoman whose name he could no longer remember. He had been young, virtually inexperienced, and the only memory of that quick, clandestine foray into carnality had been the young woman's eagerness to suck his cock though she hadn't wanted it inside her. He had yet to know the pleasure of sliding between a woman's thighs and he looked forward to the moment he could claim Shanee Iphito as his mate.

He shuddered again as she straightened up between his legs and licked her lips, her eyes locked on his.

"You are more man than this woman has ever seen," she told him.

He held his arms out to her and she stretched out atop him, turning her head so her cheek rested on his muscular chest.

"And you are all I have dreamed of for two decades, little Amazeen."

"I want you inside me," she whispered.

"And you will have me there," he said, caressing her shoulder, stroking her hair. "Give us a few more days and I'll be pouring myself into you."

His words sent tremors through Shanee. Her hand was on his pectoral, her fingers twirling the hair that grew thickly over his taut muscles. "I don't know if I can wait a few more days," she said.

His arms tightened around her. "I can pleasure you with my hands and my mouth, *ionúin*, until I can pleasure you with my cock. Be patient. Anything worth having is worth waiting for."

She fell asleep there on top of him with his strong, powerful arms wrapped around her, her lower body securely positioned between his long legs. His chin rested atop her head and as their breaths became one in unison and rhythm, the waterfall gently lulled him into slumber beneath her.

Chapter Three

"I have no intention of ever seeing my mother again," Ailyn told her two days later when she'd finally dredged up the courage to ask him. They were reclining on a large flat boulder behind the cascade of the waterfall. The bright light spearing down from the ceiling was waning and he had lit several torches that were ranged along the walls.

"General Strom believed that might be the case," Shanee told him.

"Is he better than Morrison?" he inquired.

She nodded. "A good man, I think."

"If she really is dying," he said, his gaze clouding, "it makes sense why she would want me home."

"For the money in the *an Éilvéiseach* bank account?"

His head swiveled toward her, his brow furrowed. "I'd forgotten about that," he said. "No, I doubt she gave that a moment's thought. Felix might have but not our mother."

"Then why?" she asked.

He held her gaze for a moment. "Think about it, *ionúin*. What one thing can she get from me that no one else would or could give her?"

Shanee shrugged. "I can't imagine. I didn't believe for a minute that she was being sincere with her crying," she said. "I got the feeling that was simply for show."

"My mother never loved any of her children," he stated. "She was always too self-centered to care for anyone other than herself. We all grew up with wet nurses and nannies and myriad servants. I spent most of my life with my father's parents before being sent to military school when I was seven. We all went to Soraniline Military Academy as soon as we were old enough and then on to the Fleet Academy. It was rare we were allowed home even on high holidays. My holidays and summers were always at my grandparents'." He wiped a hand over his face. "That was why I was so excited to be assigned to my father's ship when I got my commission. I was able to spend two months with him without my mother demanding his attention before it went down in flames."

"You were the only survivor," she said.

"Aye and I've prayed many a night that I had died with the rest of the crew."

"Your time on R-9 must have been hell," she said softly.

"Hell doesn't even begin to describe it," he told her. "But it's the reason my mother wants me after forty-four years of not giving a damn if I lived or died."

She looked at him. He didn't look at day over twenty-five and she said as much.

"And I won't," he said, before sliding off the boulder and into the depths of the pool.

She watched him swim across the milky green water then leave the coolness of the pool for his pallet. She pushed away from the boulder and swam underwater to the point where he'd left the pool then stood up, shaking her long white hair behind her. She waded to the shore then knelt down beside him. He was sitting with his knees drawn up, his arms encircling them.

"Reapers don't age as you know it," he told her as she took up a towel he'd given her earlier and began drying her hair. "For every year you age, I will age less than an hour."

Shanee had not read that in the report she'd been given on the Reapers. She knew they could live well past two hundred and even beyond but it had not occurred to her that a Reaper's physical appearance would change so little over time.

"If you cut me, I'll heal instantly. Stab me and the wound will close right before your eyes. If you burn me, the flesh will rejuvenate and my body will re-form itself to look as I did before the flames touched it. The only true way for me to die is to have my head severed from my body and the queen destroyed."

"At that rate, you could live forever," she said.

"Now do you see what it is she wants from me?" he asked.

The knowledge came like a sharp blow to her solar plexus and she stared at him. "One of your revenant worms!"

He nodded. "She may think she does but she has no idea what it is she is asking, what having a hellion inside her will do to her. All she cares about is not dying, living for as long as she can and having people cater to her every whim. She craves attention, thrives on wielding power over those she considers lesser beings. She is not a good woman."

"That was my impression," Shanee admitted. She reached out to run a hand along his bare shoulders. "Do you want to talk about what happened to you on R-9?"

He lowered his head. "There are only two people I've ever discussed it with and one of them is Tariq. When we spoke of it, we weren't face-to-face. He has such power within him, *ionúin*, it is hard to fathom it. In our minds, he would speak to us all without our guards knowing. Without him encouraging us to hold on, most of us would have gone insane." He closed his eyes. "Some of us did and had to be put down."

Shanee flinched. He spoke of those poor men as though they were animals.

"They were," he said, easily reading her mind. He opened his eyes and turned to look at her. "I am."

"I can't begin to imagine how you felt when they gave you..." she frowned. "What did they call it?"

"Transference," he said. "They cut you open and drop the revenant worm on the cut. The fledgling wiggles down inside you and takes hold. It hurts like hell, believe me."

She thought of General Strom and his comment that it was not pleasant. "What did you feel when you Transitioned for the first time?"

He drew in a long breath and looked away from her, centering his gaze across the chamber to the far wall. "I don't like talking about it."

"At least tell me how you reacted to it, Ailyn. How you..."

"I had no idea what they were going to do to me that day," he said. "They came to my cell, shackled me and took me to one of their laboratories. They shoved me facedown on a stainless steel table, lashed my hands and legs to the corners. Since I was naked to begin with—we weren't allowed clothing—all I remember was shivering violently because that damned stainless steel was cold as ice on my bare flesh. When they came in with this jar, I couldn't see what was in it. Someone grabbed a handful of my hair and jerked my head up. Someone else poured a thick fluid down my throat. I remember gagging, realizing it was blood, and the next thing I knew, they were slicing my back open. I felt the blood running down my hip and then hell opened up and swallowed me whole."

"There was a revenant worm in the jar."

"Aye," he said, "and the pain was so intense all I could do was lie there and scream as she ate her way through my kidney. You can't imagine the agony, Shanee. No one can."

Shanee shuddered at the image.

"Everyone hurried out of the room. It seemed to take forever but I know it was only a matter of moments before I began to change. When the Transition was complete, I broke free of the restraints as though they'd been made from paper. I rolled off the table and slammed myself against the wall, snarling and spitting. The only thought that kept going through my mind was that I was going to stay that way. That I would be a beast for the rest of my life. All I could do was crouch there and howl with despair."

"You must have felt so alone," she whispered.

"At the height of the agony I heard Tariq speaking to me but I thought I was going insane. I was hearing voices, I was no longer human. I just wanted to curl up and die." His shoulders flexed as though he were reliving that horrible time. "Eventually I wore myself out and just collapsed on the floor, foaming at the mouth, whimpering. At some point I slept and when I awoke, I had reverted back to being human. I heard Tariq speaking to me and he explained what had happened to me, what would continue to happen to me every three months for the rest of a very long, unnatural life."

"Did his speaking to you help?" she asked.

"Not at first," he replied. "At first I was sickened and enraged that this had been done to me against my will. I never knew such creatures as Reapers even existed and here was this strange, disembodied voice telling me that the entire race came about

because a goddess and demon were at war with one another. I just couldn't get my head around that, but he didn't give up. He talked to me until I really started listening. If it had not been for Tariq, I could not have survived close to twenty years of being locked in that containment cell every moment of my life without companionship or anything else for that matter. It has taken me two years in this paradise to begin to feel human again."

"By the gods, Ailyn," she said, feeling tears building in her eyes. She had not cried since she was a babe in arms but his pain touched her as nothing ever had. "How awful for you."

"And now you know why some men's minds were ripped apart by the experience and they had to be destroyed. A man with the powers of a Reaper who cannot reason or know right from wrong is not fit to walk among humanity. He is a living, breathing danger to everyone with whom he comes into contact. They called them rogues and simply terminated them."

"How long did you remain in Transition?" she asked, aching for him.

"A week," he said. "A little longer. I have no idea. When I reverted, I just lay curled up in a fetal position and cried with relief until they told me that such changes would be mine for the rest of my life and that I had the goddess to thank for my predicament."

"Morrighunia is the goddess," she said. "Who is the demon?"

"Raphian, the Destroyer of Men's Souls," he said. "Tariq has told us very little about him. I believe the demon is the only thing in the megaverse the Prime Reaper fears."

"I can't believe your mother knows what being turned into a Reaper would be like," Shanee said.

"No doubt she has read the file on R-9," he said. "The gods only know how she managed that but if she's married to a vice-counselor, perhaps he had contacts. No doubt she would have heard about Regis."

"Regis?" she inquired.

Once more his shoulders flexed as if he were in pain. "Regis was a Chalean who was brought to R-9 after I'd been there about ten years. He had been a communications specialist on a ship that had been boarded by Alliance troopers. There was a firefight and only a few of the crew survived. Regis was the only male and he was sent to us. The scientists did all the tests on him and were enraged to learn he had a terminal illness and only a few months left to live." He shrugged. "They gave him a hellion anyway, curious to see if the revenant worm would cure him."

"And it did."

"He was the only man among us who I have heard was truly happy about being turned into a Reaper."

"I wonder if your mother knows she'll have powers as well as longevity," Shanee said.

"Oh I know she does. She'll have learned all she could about Reapers. She'll know the Transference will be painful and that she will Transition, she'll need to take tenses and Sustenance every day of her life. To her, that would be worth any amount of pain and suffering, but knowing what happens to you and *feeling* what happens to you are two entirely different animals." He laughed bitterly at his unintended pun.

"I wonder how the Burgon is handling his transformation," Shanee commented.

"Unlike my mother, Bakari has seen Reapers in full Transition," Ailyn said. "It was he who stopped the making of new ones when he became Burgon because he didn't want that evil foisted off on men who did not ask for or want it. Vengeance was his motive for becoming one of us and I am sure he is dealing with the change as he has dealt with everything in his life."

"Like the powerful man he is," she said.

"Aye." He released a long breath. "Enough of such talk." He got to his feet and reached for the breechclout he had discarded earlier. "I want to go out to the stream and dive in." He strapped on the abbreviated strip of material. "I want to go over Mount Korak to the village and dive off that gods-be-damned waterfall that taunts me in my dreams. I want to pit myself against Tariq and see which one of us can swim the fastest and the longest underwater."

Shanee grinned. "Men are such simple creatures," she said, holding her hand out for him to help her up. "It is the truly important things in life that they contemplate."

"It is important to me," he said with a sniff. He raked his eyes down her, his gaze hot and possessive. "Despite the fact I prefer you bare to my gaze, *ionúin*, I would rather no other man does until our Joining. I believe we should cover you so I can begin contemplating other important matters."

Shaking her head, she walked over to the rock where she had left her tunic and trousers. As she reached for them, she felt a strange sensation flutter across her body, and when she looked down, was amazed to see she was wearing a black blouse and matching short skirt. She gasped, swung her head toward Ailyn. "How did you do that?" she whispered.

"Reapers can rearrange molecules," he said with a shrug. "It is an easy thing though it takes energy."

She fingered the material that was soft and pliable. "That is a handy trick, Reaper," she laughed.

"Don't call me that," he asked, and when she met his gaze, she could see he meant it.

"All right, *ehemann*," she said.

Ailyn asked her what that meant.

"It means 'husband' in the Amazeen language," she said, "and since Joinings are very rare on my world—almost non-existent—it is a term of honor whereby a warrioress relinquishes some of her freedom to mate with a male."

His smile was as bright as the sun and he strode to her, lifted her into his arms and swung her around. "How do you say 'wife' in Amazeen?" he asked.

"Oh no," she said, shaking her head. "It's an ugly-sounding word and I much prefer *ionúin*."

He lowered his head to claim her lips and the kiss he gave her made her toes curl again. It was a promise of things to come and her entire body practically melted into his arms. When he released her mouth, he winked at her like a little boy.

"Let's go play," he said, and started toward the chamber entrance with her.

"Are you going to carry me all the way to the village?" she asked.

"All the way to the stream perhaps," he said. "It's a long way to the village, *ionúin*, and you are no lightweight." He shifted her against him—tossing her up in the air as though she weighed no more than a feather.

Her arms were laced around his neck. "Now you insult me, *ehemann*," she said. "I might decide to flirt with the men in the village."

"You do so at their peril, wench," he growled as he carried her out of the cave and into the moonlight.

The jungle was still but insects were making noises she'd never heard before. There was a sweet scent in the air, which he told her was jasmine. As he strode purposefully toward the meandering stream with its waters silver-shot from the full moon overhead, he told her about his desire to swim the length of the stream one day.

"It winds down past the village and into what the people of Theristes call the painted desert where it empties into a wadi at the base. I've walked there but next time, I'd like to swim."

"I am curious about something, Ailyn," she said as he lowered her to the ground.

"What?" he asked. He was haphazardly braiding his long hair. He frowned. "Would you cut this for me when we go back to the cave?"

"No," she stated emphatically then continued speaking as though that matter was settled. "Why do you keep to yourself up here? Didn't you get enough solitude when you were on Riezell-Nine?"

"But it gets in the gods-be-damned way, *ionúin*," he complained.

"If you cut yours, I'll cut mine."

"No!" he nearly shouted. "You'll do no such thing! I love your hair." He reached out to touch it in the moonlight. The glow from the heavenly body overhead seemed to catch in her white tresses and gave her a mystical look that turned his cock hard as stone.

"Then don't mention cutting yours again," she warned. She tugged on his braid. "I find it very sexy." Before he could argue anymore, she ran out into the stream, laughing.

Ailyn watched her backstroking her way through the water and closed his eyes.

"*Ehemann!*" she protested as she felt her clothing vanish.

He opened his eyes and grinned at her. "You don't need them in there," he said then dropped his breechclout to dive in after her.

She whooped and struck out in the stream, swimming as fast as she could but she was no match for him even if it had been over twenty years since he'd been an aquatic champion. He easily overtook her and wrapped his arms around her, bringing her up against his naked body, his hard cock sliding between her legs so she was straddling that powerful rod.

"When it is safe to thrust into you, *ionúin*," he said, "you are going to make me one very happy man."

He was supporting them in the water, his powerful legs scissoring to keep them afloat but she clamped her thighs tightly around his shaft and ground her hips against his.

"You have no idea, *ehemann*," she whispered, and slanted her mouth over his. She thrust her tongue deeply into his mouth and rubbed her bare breasts against his chest.

Pure, electric lust drove straight through Ailyn Harmattan. He had many years of forced celibacy to catch up on and with one potent kick of his legs, he shot them backward toward the shore. His hunger was like a living beast ripping at him with unsheathed claws. He came out of the water, fell to his back with his lady still clinging to him and flipped her over so she was lying beneath him.

"You are an evil woman, Shanee," he said in a deep, husky voice.

"And you are..." she began, but his lips were on her breast and his teeth were nipping at her nipple and she became like warm honey, flowing beneath him with her legs spread wide in invitation.

Ailyn's body was between her thighs, his cock bent down along her slit but he knew better than to take her. She was highly fertile and just one errant drop of his sperm would impregnate her. He knew it as surely as he knew he was about to explode to have her. Even the top of his head felt as though it were about to burst open.

He released her nipple and licked his way down her chest, her belly, her abdomen, until he could pluck at her nether hairs with his teeth.

"You are beyond evil, *ehemann*," she accused. "You are malevolent!" Her fingers dove into his thick hair. "Do it, Ailyn. Do it!"

Although she was arching her hips up to him, he shook his head. As much as he wanted—*needed*—to thrust into her warm sheath, he would not. It was sheer torment and his cock burned so fiercely it was painful but he would deny them both.

For now.

Shanee shuddered as his lips closed over her clit. His tongue was laving it and she was squirming, grabbing handfuls of the loose sand beneath her, her heels digging into the mud for they were barely out of the water. As his tongue dragged along her folds, swirled over her aching flesh, she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out.

He was poised between her legs and looked up at her, the moonlight lovingly caressing his handsome face. "Would you like to see true malevolence, little Amazeen?" he drawled.

The Primary Riezell Guardian lifted her head to look down at him. There was something so primal in his gaze, so possessive, that she felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. "Ailyn?" she questioned.

Very deliberately he thrust his index finger inside her then his middle finger. He swiveled his fingers until he could touch that fleshy pad he sought within her. She was keenly aware of his other hand beneath her rump and when he slowly insinuated a finger into her anus, she nearly shot up from the ground.

"Ailyn!" she cried out, and she heard him laugh a second before his lips closed on her clit.

There was no way to describe the things he was doing to her, Shanee thought. Her body was flaming, her womb jerking. The ripples of pleasure were so intense, so concentrated, all she could do was lift her hips and moan.

In and out his fingers and thumb went as he suckled that swollen bud where all sensation was gathering. She bore down on his hand—impaling her lower body on his fingers—and her fingers speared through his hair to hold his head to her cunt. He was stroking that spongy spot inside her and causing such unbelievable pleasure she thought she would fragment. Powerful, forceful spasms began high up in her channel then shot downward in a wave that had her screaming her release.

Ailyn lapped at the sweetness that flowed from his lady's cunt and ground his stony erection into the wet ground. He came at the same moment she did though it shamed him to do so. He would have preferred having been inside her sweet channel.

Half in and half out of the stream, he lay there with his cheek pressed to Shanee's belly. He was striving to get his ragged breathing under control as her hands smoothed his wet hair.

They lay like that for a long while. She was staring up with wonder at the moon above them and he was looking at the dark jungle beyond. When he spoke, his warm breath fanned over her naked hip.

"At first," he said, "when we were brought to Theristes, I couldn't get enough of being with the people here. It had been so long since I'd spoken face-to-face with any one and I was eager to learn about them, their worlds, how they had adapted to becoming Reapers. I was so excited I don't think I slept all that much those first few days but then the novelty wore off."

His fingers were still inside her and he lay there a bit longer just feeling her pulse beating through the softness. Gently he released his intimate hold on her and brought his arm up to lie over her thigh.

"One day I realized I had had enough company and I ventured out into the jungle as another of us had done. I spent the entire day just sitting by a little pond and

watching the monkeys playing tag in the branches overhead. When I came back that evening Tariq sought me out and asked me to walk with him."

"Had he been worried about you?"

"No," he replied. "He knew what was happening inside me. He'd spent over fifty years in Cell Two. He understood. He told me that when Cair Ghrian had brought him back to Theristes, he'd undergone the same manic desire to be constantly with his people but then had come the day when he needed to go off on his own. Thankfully Bahiya understood and allowed him his space."

"A wise woman," she said.

"He told me if I wanted to spend some time alone that was my right. I could go off and find a place of my own and know that there would be no bars, no locked doors to keep me in that place. I would have freedom to go and come as I liked with no one to deny me."

"And so you found the cave."

"That first night in the cave, I realized that all my life I'd been imprisoned in one way or another," he said. "When I was a child, I was kept in the nursery away from my parents—most especially my mother—and when I was old enough to walk and talk, I was sent to my grandparents who were wonderful people but my grandmother was so afraid something would happen to me that there were always guards around me watching every move I made. When I went to the military academy, it was like being in prison. You were told when to get up, when to eat, when to bathe, when to go to bed. Every facet of your life is controlled by the school. Fleet Academy was worse yet and even after I had a modicum of freedom on my father's ship, I wasn't free to come and go as I pleased and I was answerable for everything I did, every decision I made—right or wrong—and if that decision did not meet with my father's approval, I was punished for it." He shrugged. "I was in a prison there too, but I didn't know it at the time."

"It must have been liberating in the cave."

"I found peace there," he said. "When I'd get lonely for company, I'd trek across the mountain to the village, spend a few hours or days and then come back. There is another man who visits me but he comes very rarely. I was as content as I knew how to be but..."

"But something was missing," she said.

"And now I know what it was."

She said nothing for a long while and when she finally spoke, she felt the tension gathering in his body.

"I will have to go back to Riezell, *ehemann*," she said. "General Strom gave me a month's leave that started from the day I arrived here. He will expect me to return. I won't be free of my duty for another two years."

"Can't you resign your commission?" he asked. "Ruan Cosaint's lady as well as Cair Ghrian's left the Guardians. Why can't you?"

Shanee tucked her lower lip between her teeth. She didn't know how to explain to him that it was her destiny to be a Riezell Guardian, that she had given up much just to be allowed the opportunity to try out for the elite assignment. She was a warrior and that was what gave her life meaning.

He pushed up from the ground and moved so he was sitting beside her. "You like the danger," he accused. "The adrenaline rush of being a Guardian."

"It's more than that," she said, also sitting up. The ground was getting cold and a light breeze had sprung up to chill her. She wrapped her arms around her bare breasts.

Without a blink of his eyes, he waved his hand and a black shirt and britches appeared to cover her flesh. Another wave and he was clad once more in a breechclout.

"Thank you," she said softly. She raised her knees and laid her head down on them. "Can I tell you why I don't want to give up being a Guardian?"

"You can tell me anything," he said, but she could hear the hurt in his voice.

"How much do you know about Amazeen?" she asked.

"Very little," he said then cast her a glance. "I was surprised you had both breasts. I'd heard your people took off one."

Shanee nodded. "Most do," she said. "If you are right-handed, it would be the right breast and the other way around if you're left-handed. It is considered expedient in the use of a bow."

"Ah," he said, nodding. "Makes sense."

"It is left up to each woman if she wants to have it done. I didn't. I knew I wanted to be a warrior but I knew my fighting would be with dagger, laser or crossbow and with a crossbow, you don't have to worry about getting your tit caught in the string."

"Are you good with those weapons?" he asked quietly.

"I am an expert with those weapons," she replied. "My mother saw to it. She is the defense queen."

He nodded again as though that information had been expected.

"Amazeen do not like to truck in the affairs of other worlds," she said, digging her bare toes into the sand. "We keep mainly to ourselves although there are other female groups with whom we interact."

"Like the Hell Hags and the Multitude," he said. "My mother belongs to the Multitude."

"I thought as much. She has that air about her," his lady commented.

"So how did you get permission to join the Riezell Guardians?" he asked.

Shanee looked out across the stream. "I didn't get permission," she said. "I left and cannot return. As far as my tribe is concerned, I am dead. I became an outcast when I stole my mother's Fiach runabout and journeyed to Riezell."

"Did being a Guardian mean that much to you that you would throw away your heritage?" he queried.

"It was more than that," she said. "I had very strong feelings about the Border Wars. For the most part Amazeen stayed out of the conflict though we sided with the Alliance. Had my mother ever gotten the chance, she would have taken Ryden Bakari captive. She is very enamored of the Burgon."

Ailyn smiled. "He has his problem with women, doesn't he?" He nudged his chin toward the mountain. "There are over a hundred women here from his seraglio. He never laid a hand to a single one of them but they speak of him as though he were a veritable god."

"My mother and her sister think he is," she told him. "You were Coalition captured by the Alliance yet you went with Rory Quinn and the others to fight for the Burgon."

"I admire Ryden Bakari. Had it not been for him, we might all still be locked in con cells on R-9. He not only put an end to the making of new Reapers, he gave us our freedom. Like all the others, I owed him. When his family was massacred by the New Coalition, I felt I should help out of respect for Bakari."

"He deserves that respect and allegiance," she said.

"So you wanted to make a difference in the outcome of the war," he said. "How did you wind up in Riezell then if you were...?" He stopped, blinked and gave her an astonished look. "You were sent there by the Alliance."

She cocked one shoulder. "I was killing two birds with one stone as I saw it. I was aiding the Alliance and I was joining the Guardians. Life was beginning to turn as I wanted it to."

"And now?" he asked.

She met his gaze. "You can come back to Riezell with me," she suggested.

"To be your kept man?"

Shanee frowned. "No, as my husband. You don't have to let your mother know you're there."

"There is no way under heaven or above hell that she wouldn't find out, *ionúin*," he said. "Nothing happens on that planet that her spies aren't privy to."

"Even so, you don't have to see her. Primä One and Primä Two wouldn't allow anyone into my quarters without your direct consent."

"Primä One and Primä Two?"

"My cybots," she answered. "They had been assigned to me by General Morrison when I was sent after Rory Quinn to arrest him and when Morrison decided to off himself, I asked for permanent custody of P1 and P2. There was some finagling but the 'bots are mine." She laughed. "I've reprogrammed them and they are as loyal to me as if I had given birth to them. They're my babies."

"Class 10s, huh?" He drew in a long breath. "That's seven feet of pure power. There was one on the Tiogar's ship and I stayed well away from it. They only had Class 2s when I graduated Fleet Academy. Those things scare me."

Shanee made a rude sound with her lips. "As if anything could scare a Reaper," she said then winced at labeling him such since he'd asked her not to.

"There is one thing that every Reaper is scared shitless of," he said.

"Other than water and fire?"

"Well, aye," he corrected himself. "But you can stay the hell away from fire and water can be overcome. This can't."

"What is it?"

"Ghorets," he said.

Instinctively Shanee glanced down at the ground, half expecting to see one of the three-foot-long silver and green vipers with florescent blue venom—the bite from which could kill a human in the blink of an eye.

"There are no snakes on Theristes," he told her. "Lizards, but no snakes and the lizards aren't venomous."

"I don't think there is a humanoid alive who isn't terrified of ghorets," she said with a shudder. "Their bite can't kill you though, can it, like it can the rest of us?"

"No, but I'm told you will wish you could die after being bitten by one. Tariq said when he first arrived on R-9 and they began experimenting on him, they put a juvenile ghoret in his cell to see what would happen when it bit him. He was sick for days afterward. He said if it had been a full-grown specimen, he would have been much sicker and the illness longer-lasting."

"You very neatly changed the subject, didn't you?" she asked.

"I'm not going back to Riezell ever again, Shanee," he said.

"But, Ailyn..."

"No," he said, and the word left no doubt in her mind that it was final.

Chapter Four

Elspeth Harmattan-Jost could barely breathe as she lay in her huge four-poster bed and stared out at the snow falling gently over the gardens of her new husband's estate. Her head throbbed brutally and as she lifted a hand that shook worse each day with the palsy that was killing her, the simple action seemed to take all her waning energy.

"What can I do, Mother?" Felix asked, his eyes filled with worry. "The Riezell Guardian has gone after Ailyn. Please try to hang on until he gets here."

Giving her youngest son a faint smile, Elspeth closed her eyes. "Pray he arrives in time, Felix."

Realizing his mother had slipped once more into the slumbers that claimed her more frequently and for longer periods of time, Felix hung his head. He had taken leave from the new military transport to which he'd been assigned to be with his ailing mother, though there didn't appear to be anything he could do for her. Much of the time she preferred her privacy and would not allow even his stepfather into their bedchamber.

"She is fading fast," the vice-counselor had told Felix. "I have been on the horn every day with Command Central but there's been no word from Iphito."

"She would only have reached Theristes in the last day or so, Father," Felix reminded the man, almost choking on the title his mother insisted he give Jost.

"I expected daily reports!"

"Reports of what?" Felix had countered. "What the Amazeen was doing on board the LRC? What good is that?"

The vice-counselor had cursed and then stomped out of the room. He cared as much for Felix as the young man did for him and therefore there was no love to lose between them. If anything, Felix hated Jost almost as much as he did his oldest brother.

"I know it was him," Felix said to his sleeping mother. "I do. He saw me and I saw the recognition in his eyes. I might have been young when he disappeared but he's a Reaper now and I know gods-be-damned well he read my thoughts. He *knew* who I was."

Getting up to leave, he took one last look at his mother. She looked as though she were already lying in her casket. She was the only thing he had ever loved in life and the thought of losing her was almost more than he could bear.

"I'll bring him back to you, Mother. I swear I will, if it's the last thing I ever do!" he said before closing the door quietly behind him.

He did not see the humorless smile that tugged at his mother's lips.

* * * * *

General Maximillian Strom had never known his mother or his father either, for that matter. He had grown up in a state-run orphanage on Esvaria, escaping that hellhole when he was fourteen. Stowing away on a cargo transport dropping off supplies for the orphanage, he had been overjoyed to find himself on Riezell. He'd made a beeline for the Coalition Forces training camp and enlisted, lying about his age. Since the conflict with the Alliance was not going well and every able-bodied male was needed to churn the wheels of the war machine, no one questioned him and he was sworn in as an infantryman.

Rising up quickly through the enlisted ranks on bloody battlefields, one particularly heroic act of courage and selfless bravery had earned him a promotion to lieutenant and from there until the peace treaty with the Alliance was signed, Strom had steadily advanced up the ladder until the golden star of a Fleet General now rested on his broad shoulders.

He was proud of his accomplishments from unwanted child of a nameless mother and careless father to one of the most respected positions within the Riezell Conclave. He took his job seriously and to have anyone question the way he did it was to incur Strom's wrath.

"You can tell that ass-wipe that if I'd heard something from Iphito, I would have already informed him!" the general yelled at the calm face of his secretary on the vid-com. He flicked off the receiver then flicked it back on just as quickly. "And tell him to stop calling this office every time the wind shifts direction. I am sick of it!" Once more he turned off the vid-com.

Drumming his fingers angrily on the desk, Strom reached over and turned the vid-com back on. "Get me..."

"The arch-counselor is on the line, Sir," Miriam said, and her face changed to that of a diminutive one that was creased with humor.

"Is that bad little vice-counselor annoying you, Max?" Arch-Counselor Euphrates inquired. He was what was politely termed a little person but there was nothing small about the man's broad grin or his twinkling green eyes. His stubby little fingers were steepled together and loaded down with a fortune in jeweled rings on each one.

"If he doesn't get the fuck off my back, I'm going to flush him down the loo with yesterday's turds!"

The arch-counselor winced then laughed. "Please tell me you flush your loo more often than that, Max."

"It isn't funny, Sebastian!" the general snapped.

"No and very unsanitary, I should think," the arch-counselor agreed. "Not to mention malodorous."

Strom growled as he flopped back in his chair. "I hate that little prick anyway."

"You and eighty percent of the Conclave," the arch-counselor stated with a heartfelt sigh.

Narrowing his eyes, the general ground his teeth. "I could get rid of him for you."

"Let me think about that for a while," the arch-counselor said. "So is there any news about Lieutenant Harmattan then?"

"We know he's there but until the ship returns to Theristes, we won't know if he'll come home with our Guardian."

"I knew his father of course," the arch-counselor said. "Good man, although a bit too stern for my tastes. I heard he was very rough on his eldest."

"I've heard that too," Strom said. "If I were Ailyn Harmattan, I wouldn't want to return to Riezell. What is there for him here?"

"An inheritance worth more than that of the Supreme Legare's."

"I'm sure he knows that and doesn't give a Diabolusian rat's ass about it," the general commented. "Money is worthless on Theristes."

"Umm," the arch-counselor drawled, stroking his small little chin. "Perhaps we could get him to donate the monies to the Conclave treasury."

"That would surely kill the old bat Jost shackled himself to," Strom said with a snort.

"Milady Jost wants a fledgling, Max, not the money, although if money could buy her a revenant worm on the black market, she'd have been shopping there long before now."

"I imagine the day will come when some enterprising bastard convinces a Reaper to let him harvest a few hellions to breed. A fortune could be made and lives endangered," the general said, and his face showed his unease with such a notion.

"The Conclave has already thought of that and we're pushing through legislation to make it illegal before someone does indeed try it. We'll be assigning the death penalty to such a crime so perhaps that will deter the less enthusiastic mobsters."

"Hopefully the general public hasn't heard about what was done on R-9 but the news is bound to leak out eventually. It's best to be prepared."

"And we will be," the arch-counselor assured him. "So other than to complain about Jost being a pain in your ass, was there another reason you wished to annoy me?"

General Strom smiled. The two men had been very good friends for a long time and Strom knew he directly owed his present promotion to head of Command Central to the arch-counselor. "Can't I just call to rattle your cage now and then, Bas?"

"You assume I have nothing better to do with my time than sit here and wait for you to interrupt me," the little man grumbled. "I – unlike you – have a life, you know."

"And how is the lady arch-counselor?"

Sebastian Euphrates rolled his eyes. "Speaking of pains in the ass! Pregnancy has not made Trini glow. It has made her puke and given her copious heartburn. It has not

made her maternal. It has made her a veritable harpy! Her constant demands keep me scuttling back and forth between the bed and the duplicator with such odd things as kumquats and glazed fried cakes and Serenian potted meat." The arch-counselor grimaced. "Potted meat, Maximillian. Potted meat!"

"It's not so bad on bread with a little Gearmánach mustard," the general told him.

"She sticks her finger in it and laps it up as though it is honey!"

"Poor Sebastian. It will all be worth it when the little one arrives. You'll see."

The arch-counselor heaved a sigh bigger than himself. "I suppose." He shrugged. "Best let Jost live awhile longer, Max."

"Aw come on, Bas! Can't I at least cripple him? Carve off a leg? An arm? Take out an eye?"

"No, leave him be. We'll just have to work around him for the time being. Let me know when you hear back from our Amazeen."

That said, the vid-com screen went black.

In a much better frame of mind now that he'd swapped silliness with his friend, Strom propped his feet on his desk and threaded his fingers together at his waist. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment then closed his eyes to take a little nap.

It was good to be the man in charge.

* * * * *

Vice-Counselor Laverne Jost was not a happy man. Twice in one morning he'd been spoken to as though he were no one of consequence and twice more he had been simply ignored. Such insults were not to be tolerated.

"I wish to hire one of your people," the vice-counselor snapped as soon as his vid-com revealed a black-hooded figure sitting at a desk behind which was a stark white wall.

"Fifty thousand gold cúirs up front. The price is non-negotiable," the figure said, its voice electronically altered to hide the speaker's identity.

"What will that buy me?"

"A single unit disposal."

"Guaranteed?"

"Unless—as it was in your case—a Riezell Guardian gets in the way," the figure stated. "Then, we can not guarantee success."

Jost thought about the Storian assassin who had been sent after him and the way the man had died at the hands of the Primary Riezell Guardian Chastain Neff.

"I knew about the attempt," the vice-counselor said. "This person won't."

"Whatever you say," the figure drawled. "I require half the money now along with the target's name given to the man who supplied you with my vid-addy. The other half must be paid upon completion of the disposal."

"That's a bit steep."

"Take it or leave it," the hooded man said.

"All right," Jost muttered. "We have a deal."

* * * * *

Queen Polemusa, the defense queen of the Amazeen, had long hated her sister Molpadia, the domestic queen. Their rivalry went back to the cradle when each had fought over a simple rag doll both had wanted. Polemusa had won then and she won now, brutally tossing her sister over her head as they fought still once again, each striving to outdo the other on the mat. The wind knocked out of her, it was easy for Polemusa to fall upon her sister and pin her, the referee calling the match.

"Bitch," Molpadia managed to get out as she struggled for breath.

"Ugly hag," Polemusa replied, and got lithely to her feet, striding away with her naked shoulders gleaming with sweat, her long bare legs rippling with muscles.

"You won't always win," Molpadia hissed as she struggled to get up from the mat.

"Yes I will," her sister said with a sneer.

Glaukia Terramedes, Polemusa's assistant, came over to the defense queen and whispered something in the tall woman's ear.

Polemusa's face paled. "You are sure of this?"

"As sure as I am that the sun will rise over Mount Thermodosa come morning," Glaukia replied, holding the defense queen's narrowed gaze.

The pallor fled Polemusa's face and anger replaced it. "Ready my runabout. I..."

"The new one to replace the one your treacherous daughter stole," Molpadia said with a snort. She had buried her sweaty face in a towel and did not see her sister move. With one sweep of Polemusa's leg, Molpadia went down hard on the bare wood floor, crying out as her forearm snapped when she fell upon it.

"Open your mouth one more time about Shanee and I swear I will relieve you of your tongue, Molpadia!" Polemusa shouted, snatching up the dagger from her belt lying on the exercise table.

Sucking up the pain that was invading the entire left side of her body, Molpadia pushed herself to a sitting position. Her jaw was clamped tightly shut—partly so no other sign of weakness would escape her mouth and partly because she feared her sister would make good on her threat. She sat there and glowered at Polemusa with hatred.

"I will be gone for a while," Polemusa told Molpadia. "Try not to send our world into ruin while I am away."

Molpadia watched her elder sister leave the gymnasium and cursed her when she was no longer in sight. "One day soon, Polemusa, I will chant at your funeral byre!"

Chapter Five

The trek across the mountain in the moonlight was strangely romantic, Shanee thought. She was walking beside her lover, following a trail he knew by heart. He had dressed her once again in the black blouse and short skirt that he seemed to like so well while he was clad in the breechclout that fit his powerful physique to perfection. While he had fashioned boots for her, he was barefoot.

"Will Tariq know we are coming?" she asked. Her right hand was in Ailyn's as they walked. His right hand carried the spear that was never far from reach.

"Aye, he will."

Ailyn had been quiet since they left the stream. He'd stopped only long enough to gather several pieces of fruit for their evening meal and even then he'd seemed preoccupied.

"Are you angry at me?" she asked.

He stopped and looked down at her. His face was hidden in shadow, the moon behind him, but she could see a faint reddish glow in his eyes.

"No, *ionúin*. Why would I be angry at you?"

"For wanting you to go back to Riezell with me. For me wanting to continue my job with the Guardians," she answered.

"We won't discuss that now," he said, and began walking again, tugging gently at her hand.

"Then when will we discuss it?" she asked in a petulant voice.

"When the time is right," he said.

Miffed at his response, Shanee clamped her mouth shut. If he didn't want to talk, she wouldn't talk either.

It didn't seem to take as long going back to the village as it had coming out from it, Shanee thought. Ailyn had taken a different trail than Barat had and the climb up and over the mountain had not seemed as strenuous or taken as long. She wondered if Barat had been ordered to take her a longer way around to give Ailyn time to meet them.

The village was still for it was very late by the time they entered the grassland where the huts sat in a semicircle around the massive waterfall. Here and there torches had been left burning to light the way and it was to the largest of the huts – Tariq's – that Ailyn led her.

Ducking beneath the leather flap that covered the arched entrance to the bamboo dwelling, Shanee was surprised to see Tariq sitting beside a lantern, a book in his hand. He smiled at them as they entered his abode.

"You are well, Shanee?" he asked.

"My mate is in good health," Ailyn answered, and in his voice was a bit of a warning.

Tariq nodded and put a leaf in the book to mark his place before putting it aside and getting to his feet. He noticed Shanee looking at the old-fashioned tome. "A gift from Ryden," he said. "Its origin is Terra."

Shanee drew in a surprised breath. "Surely not!"

"Aye, it is," Tariq assured her. "It is a history of their world before the Burning War. I am finding it very informative."

"I would like to read it when you are finished," Ailyn said, drawing the Prime Reaper's eyes back to him.

"Of course," Tariq said. "My lady-wife has prepared a pallet for you and Shanee. It is late and she should be abed."

"I agree," Ailyn said. He turned to look at Shanee. "I will be along shortly."

"But..."

"Your mate and I have business to attend, Shanee," Tariq said.

She had to bite her tongue to keep from hissing at the men. When Tariq pointed to a leather-draped doorway off to his right, she strode over to it and ducked inside.

"Angry women do not make good bed partners, Ailyn," Tariq said with a sigh then held his hand out for Ailyn to precede him from the hut.

The two Reapers walked away from the stand of huts so their talking would not bother the villagers trying to sleep. Though the moon had set, neither needed a torch to light their way for their eyesight was as keen as a wolf's in the darkness. It was to the waterfall they went. Sitting down side by side on a broad, flat rock, they stared out over the water. Neither spoke for a long time. Finally it was Tariq who broke the silence.

"From the dawning of time when man awoke to find a rib missing and a woman lying at his side, it has been the duty and the obligation of the male to protect the female, to care for her, to provide for her, to give her children. It has been the female's task to care for her mate, to keep his hut, to bear his children and to give him the pleasure of her body. Traditionally, she is the weaker, he the stronger, and it is his will that is done."

Tariq said nothing for a few minutes as he let his companion absorb those words. When he spoke again, he drew one leg up and rested his wrist upon his knee.

"Now consider the Amazeen," he said. "They are a race of women who believe it was not they who came second into creation but that they were here first, life having been breathed into them by the goddess. The first man came from woman's womb as a child to be led and taught and controlled. Because they believe males are inferior, the Amazeen bow to no man. They are fierce warrior women and are deadly, capable fighters. They capture and enslave men of other races and think nothing of castrating them if the mood strikes. They think nothing of cutting off their breast to enhance their

ability to pull a bow. What man—I ask you—would cut off one of his balls to better wield a sword? Amazeens make formidable enemies.”

Once again Tariq fell silent to allow Ailyn to think about what he’d said.

“Are you telling me I should go back with her to Riezell?”

Tariq turned his attention to Ailyn. “No man can tell you what to do, my friend. You are a Reaper. You will do what you wish to do.”

“What if I don’t know what I want to do?” Ailyn challenged.

The Prime Reaper smiled knowingly. “The moment you looked into her eyes, you knew she was destined to be your mate. You felt the pull toward her. You felt what my people call the *eolach*, the knowing. The moment you put hands to her, she was yours and you were hers.” He laid a hand on Ailyn’s shoulder. “You will not be able to allow her to leave Theristes and return to her world without you. She cannot stay here for she has a destiny on Riezell. You cannot ask her to put aside her desires, her beliefs and her goals simply because you are the male and she is the female. That might work with a Riezellian woman but I can promise you it will not work with an Amazeen.”

“I don’t want to go back to Riezell,” Ailyn stated.

“I know this but I also know it will be hell for you here without her, a hell much worse than anything to be found in the laboratories on Riezell-Nine.” Tariq’s hand tightened on Ailyn’s shoulder. “You know Reapers mate for life and no matter where you are or where she is, there too will your heart strive to be. It is a miserable existence when your heart is separated from hers. It is a misery I do not want you to ever know, Ailyn.”

“We have not mated yet,” Ailyn said.

“Aye, but you have,” Tariq said, and when Ailyn would have protested, the Prime Reaper moved his hand from the younger man’s shoulder to over Ailyn’s heart. “You have mated here, my friend. She is yours and you have claimed her as such. You will no more allow another man to touch her now than you would willingly put your neck in the lunette of a guillotine.” He patted Ailyn’s chest twice then removed his hand, got up and headed back to his pallet and the woman whose sweet body waited for his.

Ailyn was still sitting there beside the waterfall as the first fingers of dawn stretched toward the heavens. Weary and no closer to making a decision than he had been during his vigil beside the waterfall, he went back to Tariq’s hut and entered the room set aside for Shanee and him. His lady was lying with her back to the door as he slipped onto the pallet beside her and put his arm over her, drawing her to him. The moment her body touched his, the decision was made.

“I missed you,” she said. “I don’t like being apart from you.”

“Nor I from you,” he said, his warm breath tickling the hairs at the base of her neck.

“Then what are we going to do about it, *ehemann*?” she asked.

“We,” he said, yawning before he could continue, “are going to go back to Riezell.”

She turned over beneath his arm and met his gaze. “Truly?”

He reached up to cup her cheek. "I can't fight this feeling growing inside me, *ionúin*, and I don't wish to. I sat out there all night thinking about what Tariq must have gone through when he was separated all those years from Bahiya and I knew I'd never survive such a parting without losing what little mind I have left." He ran the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip. "So you will have to be content to keep me in the style to which I intend to become accustomed."

A slow, happy smile stretched over Shanee's face and she caught his thumb between her teeth. "Aye?"

"Aye," he said, "but..."

Her smile wavered. "But?"

"I don't do housework."

She giggled.

"And there's the problem of my mother," he said, all traces of humor gone from his amber eyes. "She'll learn I'm there and she'll do everything in her power to get to me."

"With any luck, she'll have gone into the arms of the Gatherer before we get back," Shanee said, hoping that would be the case.

He yawned again.

"You get some sleep," she told him, sitting up. "You don't get enough as it is." She'd slept beside him every night and he'd tossed and turned, mumbled in his sleep, and gotten up in the middle of the night to sit outside the cave more than he'd slept.

"My kind doesn't sleep very well," he told her.

"Well, try," she ordered. "If you're to beat Tariq in a swimming contest, you need to be at your best!"

* * * * *

Ailyn sat down on the shore of Lake Briza and shook his head. After five tries, he now knew there was no way he'd ever be able to best the Prime Reaper in swimming or diving. Tariq was a veritable dolphin with the grace and power of that commanding creature.

"Cheer up, *ehemann*," Shanee told him as she laced her arm through his and leaned against his shoulder. She lowered her voice. "Your cock is bigger than his."

"I'll remember that the next time I get into a pissing contest with him," Ailyn grumbled, petulantly tossing a stick into the bubbling waters of the lake.

"And there is something else to remember."

"What?" he snapped.

"You have me and he doesn't."

Ailyn glanced at her. "Aye, well, there is that," he conceded, and lay down on his back with his knees drawn up, his breechclout covering that part of his anatomy Shanee knew he kept hidden from everyone else's eyes.

The sun was warm and most of the villagers were cavorting in the lake. Those men from R-9 who had yet to test Tariq's reassurance that the water would not harm them lazed about the shore looking longingly out over the dark blue depths of the lake.

"What is it again they call going naked?" Shanee asked.

"Sky clad," he replied. He had laced his fingers over his taut belly and was staring up at the leafy branches above them. "Why?"

"They are so beautiful," she said. "So stunningly perfect." She was watching the men and women who were not self-conscious about their nudity. Many of the concubines who had come to Theristes to mate with the Reapers had embraced the habit readily.

Ailyn lifted his head and looked in the direction his lady was staring and grunted, lowering his head once more. "Stop looking at that warrior's cock or I'll relieve him of it. He won't be so beautiful or perfect then."

"Jealous?" she teased, stretching out beside him.

"Of that puny dangly?" he scoffed then snorted. "Not gods-be-damned likely."

"Isn't it true that it isn't the size of the weapon but how a man wields it that matters?" she countered as she trailed her fingers up and down his bare arm.

"I suppose so if you prefer a blunt paring knife to a well-honed dagger," he replied.

They were quiet for a moment then he turned his head to look at her. "I am nearing my time to Transition, *ionúin*. When the day draws near, I will go back to the cave and you will stay here."

"Why can't I go back with you?"

His eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. "Because I never want you to see me like that, Shanee. Never. I hate what I am with every fiber of my being. I loathe this demoness within me. Every time I feel Her move, another part of my soul dies. It is an ugly, evil thing I am and I will not have you seeing me in that way."

"You are *not* evil," she said, her fingers wrapping around his biceps. "You are not what is inside you, Ailyn."

"You have no idea what I am," he said. He sat up to plow a hand through his wet hair. He grimaced, tugging at the length he was beginning to hate with a passion. He said as much to her.

"All right," she said with a sigh, and scrambled to her feet.

"Where are you going?" he called out.

"For a pair of scissors," she muttered.

He tossed his wet tresses behind him, circling his knees within the perimeter of his arms as he watched Tariq and Bahiya playing in the water. He wished he could be as carefree as Tariq and many of his fellow Reapers, but he could not seem to find the solace they had discovered on Theristes. He turned to look at a few of them.

Cristiano was an artist and he was painting a canvas of two lush women reclining naked beneath a tree. Damian was also an artist but he worked in wood, carving the most intricate and realistic figurines Ailyn had ever seen. Both men did superb work and were much sought after by the villagers.

He looked the other way at Gregory who loved to entertain the children—all little boys—with his sleight of hand that amazed even the adults. Joshua was an acrobat and never failed to have a crowd of spectators cheering his nimble moves. Marcus was an artist like Cristiano and Damian but his expertise was in fashioning complex knotwork that was truly spectacular.

Ailyn sighed. The men he was watching had something they could do, some contribution they could make to the village. He—on the other hand—had no skills other than his swimming abilities and the warrior tactics that had graduated him at the top of his class at the Academy.

"Okay," Shaneer said as she came back and plopped down behind him. "How short do you want it?"

He mentally shook himself, burying his thoughts and the memories of his first Transition. "What?" he asked.

"How much do you want me to cut off?"

"To here," he said, putting a hand to the nape of his neck. He twisted his head around to give her a warning look. "You aren't going to butcher it are you?"

"You never know," she said, and put her hand on the top of his head to turn it away so she could put the scissors to the heavy, wet mass.

"I don't want to look like Jared," he said, staring at the man whose hair looked as though it had been frothed with an eggbeater then pomaded with glue.

"Then you'd best be nice to me this eve, warrior," she told him.

"I'll stick my fingers so deep inside you..."

"Hush!" she said, her face flaming for two men were walking close by and had heard him. They turned to give her an appraising look.

"Eyes ahead or you'll lose them!" Ailyn growled at them. He flinched as the scissors clicked together and he felt his shorn hair fall down his back. He swallowed, hoping she wasn't going to take her embarrassment out on him. As more hair fell—one long tress over his shoulder—he picked it up and looked at it, twisting it this way and that like a switch.

"Sorry I'm cutting it?" she inquired.

"I'll let you know when I see what it looks like," he replied.

"Hey, I like it, Ailyn!" Jared called out and stuck his thumb into the air.

"Shaneer!" Ailyn gasped. He tried to turn around but she swiveled his head straight again.

"Oh be still or it won't be even," she warned him.

He muttered beneath his breath but when she thrust a mirror in front of him and he saw what she'd done, his eyebrows shot up.

"Well?" she prodded when he said nothing.

Ailyn turned his head to both sides. "I look just like my father," he whispered.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

He stared at his reflection. His mother had always insisted his hair be shorn military fashion, close to his scalp, and he had hated that skinhead look. On R-9, he didn't see a mirror for close to twenty years but his jailers kept his hair trimmed close to his ears for sanitary reasons. When he'd arrived on Theristes, he'd let it grow—just because he could. But seeing himself now and realizing just how much he looked like his father, he wasn't sure how he felt.

"I don't know, Shanee," he answered honestly. "A little of both, I think."

"Go take a dip in the water to get the stray hairs off you else they'll be prickling you all day," she told him.

He didn't question her order but got up—running both hands through his shortened hair—and waded into the lake.

"You are very good for him, Shanee."

She looked around to see Tariq. Thankfully he had a towel wrapped around his privates as he squatted down beside her. "I wish I could take the shadows from his eyes," she admitted.

"That will come in time," Tariq said. "He is nearing Transition. Did he tell you?"

"Aye," she said, nodding. Her eyes were on her lover as he did a powerful butterfly stroke through the water. "He said I was to stay here." She let out a long breath. "He won't even let me see him take Sustenance or the tenerse I know he injects each morning."

"It is because it shames him that he must do that in order to thrive," Tariq declared. "He sees it as a weakness and he does not want you to view him in that light."

"I don't care about him being a Reaper," she said, stabbing the scissors into the ground. "I don't."

"I understand that but he doesn't."

"He won't try," she snapped.

Tariq shrugged. "Shanee, to him being a Reaper is a foul, evil thing. He cannot see past the creature he becomes to the soul within the beast. He cannot see the good that could come from having powers such as his. He struggles with it but until he learns to accept what he is, not to rail against it but acknowledge it, he will never know peace. Of all the men who have had this done to them, he is the only one who is fighting it so fiercely."

Tears filled Shanee's eyes at her lover's pain. "How can I help him accept it?"

"I don't think you can. I don't think anyone can. He must do that on his own."

Ailyn looked up to see the Prime Reaper sitting close to his woman and a sharp dart of fury pierced through him. With his jaw flexed, he struck out for the shore, his eyes blazing.

Tariq shook his head. "Be understanding with him, Shanee. He is about to let loose a portion of the beast he tries so hard to contain." He got up and walked away before Ailyn could leave the water.

"Tariq!" Ailyn bellowed, and every villager stilled, every eye turned their way, every breath—especially so Shanee's—held.

"Aye, my friend?" Tariq asked, stopping and turning to face him.

"I am requesting a *Ceangal* on the day I return from my punishment," Ailyn stated.

Tariq frowned. "It is not a punishment, Ailyn, and well you know that."

"I want the *Ceangal*!" Ailyn insisted. "It is my right and I am demanding it!"

"What is a *Ceangal*?" Shanee asked as she looked from one man to another.

"It is what my people call a Joining," Tariq said. He locked gazes with her. "Is that what you wish as well, Shanee?"

"I wish it!" Ailyn shouted. "And I will have it!"

"Unless your lady agrees to it, there will be no *Ceangal*, Ailyn," Tariq snapped.

"And until you ask her in the correct, time-honored way," Bahiya said as she came to stand beside her mate, "I will advise her not to agree." She lifted her chin and folded her arms over her chest.

Ailyn's hands were opening and closing at his sides. His face was hard with fury, his eyes sparking amber fire. His breathing was shallow and quick and a vein throbbed in his temple. For a moment he glared at Bahiya then expelled a long, irritated breath out through his nose. "What do I need to do?" he asked.

"You need to get down on your knee, take her hand and ask her in the way she deserves to be asked," Bahiya told him. "She needs to hear the words from you that you will love, honor and protect her."

Other than the roar of the waterfall in the background, there was not another sound being made there at the lake. Every villager was staring intently at Ailyn, awaiting his response to the Prime Reaper's lady's demand. Though he was well-liked by the villagers, none knew him as well as Tariq did and most were wary of his refusal to embrace what he had become.

Shanee met Ailyn's gaze. Her lower lip was tucked between her teeth. This was something she had never thought would happen to her. Joining with a man—not even Rory Quinn—had not been on her list of things to do in her lifetime. Though she had loved the Phantom, he had broken her heart and she had never thought she would give that heart to anyone else. Yet with Ailyn it was different. It seemed right to Join with him. It seemed natural. It was something she found she wanted very deeply.

"I love you," Ailyn told her.

"If you do, then humble yourself before her," Bahiya said, "else those are just words and they mean nothing."

"Bahiya," Tariq said in a low voice that only his lady knew was a subtle, gentle warning.

Drawing in a deep breath, Ailyn came to stand before Shanee. He held his hand out to her and helped her to her feet. When she was standing—her hand in his—he dropped to one knee and brought her hand to his heart.

"I love you, *ionúin*," he said. "I want nothing more than to spend my life beside you. I vow that I will love and honor you, protect and care for you all the hours of our lives. I will stand beside you in good times and in bad, I will respect your goals and your beliefs and I will honor them as I honor you. I am asking you to be my life-mate, my help-meet as I pledge I will be those things to you." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "Will you Join with me, Shanee Iphito?"

Shanee's heart was trip hammering in her chest and her throat was clogged with unshed tears, making it impossible for her to speak. She could only nod.

"Aye?" he asked, his face hopeful.

She nodded again and when she got the one word out, her voice broke. "Aye."

Ailyn shot to his feet and swept her up in his arms, slanting his mouth across hers in a kiss that practically sizzled.

A resounding cheer went up from the villagers and Bahiya breathed a sigh of relief. She cast her mate an arched look then turned away.

Two days later Ailyn left the village to go back to the cave alone. For the first time since his first Transition, he did not fear the change but looked forward to it. He wanted it over with so he could return to Shanee and the *Ceangal* that awaited him.

Trudging deep into an underground portion of the cave to which he'd never taken Shanee, he was aware of the chill that flushed over his naked body. He had removed his breechclout—his one concession to propriety—for when he shifted into his beastly form, the small strip of clothing would be torn asunder anyway. Barefoot and shivering as he moved farther below the surface, the distant drip of water and squeal of bats caught his attention. He knew the bats would be fleeing his arrival, streaking out through the vents only they could fit through.

With him he carried a small satchel that contained a vial and vac-syringe of concentrated tenerse and four quart-sized bottles of blood. The blood would keep chilled in a small pool fed by an artesian well whose bubbling waters were ice cold.

When he reached the seven-foot-round hole that opened into what appeared to be a bottomless expanse, he was beginning to feel the itch, the heat infusing his body that signaled the onset of Transition.

He took the satchel and set it down beside the incandescent pool. He took out the Sustenance, put the bottles into the water and then went over to squat at the opening of

the cavern with its slick, steep walls that were as smooth as glass. He waited until his bones began to pop, his sinews to stretch, his joints creak then he jumped off into space as the first wiry hairs began to sprout on his elongating body. By the time he hit the bottom of the lava tube—landing lithely on his feet—he was more animal than man. By the time he let loose the howl hovering in his throat, he was no longer human and would not be for nearly a week.

* * * * *

Shanee hesitated as Bahiya stood cooking their midday meal. She had read the reports of what Transition was like for the men who had been turned into Reapers but reading of it and hearing of it firsthand were two separate things. She ached to know what it was her mate was experiencing at that moment.

"Talk to Tariq," Bahiya said, not looking up from the pot. "A man's Transition is different from a woman's."

Sometimes Shanee forgot that Bahiya was a female Reaper even though—like now—the older woman could read her mind so easily. Bahiya was so quiet, so shy and so gentle with everyone around her it was hard to imagine she could turn into a raging beast.

"I nibble things," Bahiya said with a giggle, and glanced around at Shanee. "I don't gobble like my man." She laughed at her joke and waved Shanee toward Tariq who was working at his forge.

It was only when the Prime Reaper fashioned jewelry and art pieces that he wore clothing of any kind. A thick leather apron hung from his neck to cover his body from chest to knee.

"A spark on your dangly hurts like the very demon," he had explained to her. "Doesn't feel good on your nipples either."

Tariq was hammering a small strip of red-hot gold on the anvil when she joined him. He smiled. "He's in full Transition and not in any kind of pain."

She sat down on a stump that was used as a stool. "Will you tell me what it is like for him?"

"You read the file on Reapers," he said. "Did they not show you a vid-com? I know they made one of each man's first Transition."

"I saw Damian's but General Strom said he couldn't find Ailyn's."

"He lied," Tariq said.

"Why would he?"

"I am sure he had his reasons." He was holding the gold strip with long-handled tongs as he worked it. Stopping his hammering, he lifted the strip and plunged it into a bucket of water.

"So tell me what Ailyn is going through. Make me understand what happened to him that day."

"What has he said to you about it?"

Shanee looked out over the village. "He said when the Transition began he didn't know what was happening. No one had told him what to expect."

"They didn't tell anyone," Tariq stated.

She went on to tell him the other things Ailyn had revealed to her about that hideous day.

"You spoke to him when he was undergoing the change," she said.

"I tried but he didn't really hear me. That wasn't important. It was the sound of my voice reassuring him that he wasn't alone in this that was meant to allay his fears."

"He thought he was going insane."

"They all did," Tariq said. "When he began listening to me, he was no longer so despondent though he constantly begged to be allowed to die."

"Thank the gods he wasn't put down like the rogues," she said. "As hard as it was for him, at least he didn't go insane with it."

Tariq took up another gold strip from a small brazier and laid it on his anvil. "The stronger the man, the better, and Ailyn is a strong man. That first Transition is always the hardest," he told her. "Most especially for a male Reaper. Females handle acute pain far better than we do so their first Transitions aren't as hard on them as ours are on us." He began hammering the gold strip. "The pain won't ever be as severe after that initial conversion. It is bad, it hurts, but it doesn't last as long and comes quicker and easier with each Transition. After twenty years, Ailyn's Transitions are more annoying to him than painful."

"So he isn't suffering," she wanted clarified.

"Not physically, no." He shrugged. "Mentally? That's another story."

"For all Reapers?"

"For Ailyn," he replied softly. He lifted the gold strip with the tongs and dropped it beside the other one in the bucket.

"What about our children?" she asked.

"Your sons," he stated.

She knew the hellion would never allow female zygotes to live. "My sons," she agreed.

"In Ailyn's sub-generation of Reapers, his sperm is rife with the spores of the revenant worm but when a child is born—unless both parents are Reapers—that child is not Reaper until he is given his own Transference."

Shanee sucked in a surprised breath. "He won't automatically become like his father?"

"Not in Ailyn's sub-generation or the sub-generation of any of the men from R-9," he replied. "Sons born of my race however, are born Reaper. They are born with a

single parasite imbedded in their kidneys. That is the way the goddess created our next generation of true Reapers."

"See, now that's something else I'm curious about because it wasn't in the file on Reapers," she said. "Ailyn told me you said Reapers came about because Morrigunia and a demon were at war."

"Raphian," Tariq said. "The Evil of Evils. It was His tainted seed that birthed the first Reaper and Morrigunia's wisdom and compassion that gave us humanity."

"How?" she asked.

"Raphian is a vile thing," the Prime Reaper said. "He is loathsome and depraved and for reasons that are His own. He despised the creation of the first human. He set about to destroy humanity, to wipe it out of the megaverse by transforming it into creatures like Himself. To do that, He ejaculated His contaminated seed into the Winds and those abhorrent kernels of evil traveled to wherever there was life. They fell upon many lands across the megaverse, attracted by an irresistible chemical compound contained within a certain plant that drew the kernel like a magnet. The kernel and the plant bonded in an obscene parody of human fertilization and from that union a spore was created. When the spore was taken into a living body—human or otherwise—it became a parasite and the parasite, which is called an obligate, grew into a revenant worm queen, infecting the body that had absorbed it." He met her gaze. "Have you seen a hellion?"

"Aye," she admitted. "It is disgusting."

"Then you know what Raphian looks like. The revenant is a miniature mirror image of the demon."

Shanee grimaced at the thought.

"It is said the goddess had heard the voice of a revenant worm, a hellion calling out to Raphian, and followed that call to a planet where a deranged woman was trying to kill a very handsome warrior. The hellion was inside the woman. Being the all-knowing goddess that She is, Morrigunia could tell the hellion had great power—the power to make a warrior invincible. Morrigunia took the woman's life and allowed the hellion to enter the warrior's body, thus granting him the power and the abilities hinted at by the hellion."

"Surely the warrior used his powers on the side of good," Shanee said.

"It is said he made many Reapers before Morrigunia allowed him to rest. Whether that is good or not, who is to say? My people would not be here had he not created the first Reaper."

"So while Morrigunia was using the Reapers for good, Raphian was making them for evil?"

"She realized Raphian had deliberately laid plans to exterminate the human race by infecting them with His sperm. When Morrigunia saw what Raphian had done, She set out to undo His evil. She could not keep those infected with the parasite from changing but She could instill human traits in them to hold at bay the evil Raphian had

unleashed. It was my people She granted Her benevolence. Our tribe is spread throughout the megaverse on planets such as Theristes and we are not allowed to leave those worlds. Morrigunia made it a law, a Greas, an obligation with which we must abide."

"Something else bothers me, Tariq. When you were captured, people like the Burgon before Ryden Bakari saw the advantage in having nearly invincible warriors and set out to make more like you." She frowned. "How did they know how to do that? Surely you didn't tell them. I read where you were tortured horribly but I can't believe you would have given them the means to make more Reapers."

Tariq shook his head. "No, I did not. I could not have told them because I didn't know such a thing was possible until the first prisoners were brought to the complex. Remember, children of my race are born Reaper. We do not make them. When they took the first hellion from me, when I realized what they were going to do, I cried for the first time in my life. The only explanation I can give you for what happened on R-9 is that Raphian was involved. He influenced the Alliance to create the hell that was Riezell-Nine."

"Why didn't Morrigunia intercede?" she asked. "Why didn't She stop what was happening there?"

"I don't know, Shanee, but there is a legend that says She has a place somewhere in the megaverse where She breeds Her own very special Reapers, sons of Her body called the *guirt*. We also know She creates them in Her guise as the Triune Goddess coming to a dying warrior on the battlefield." He shook his head. "Why She does this, no one knows, but I do know there are men like Gabriel Leveche who are Her creations. If She is making men like him elsewhere in the megaverse, Her purpose cannot be evil."

Shanee let out a long breath. She was reeling from the information Tariq had given her – far more than she had expected him to impart. "No, I suppose not."

"That is enough for you to think on for one day," he told her, taking one of the gold strips out of the bucket and over to his workbench. He sat down. "Your man is well and he is relatively calm – at least as calm as his Transition will allow him to be. When it is over, he will be back in the beat of a heart. I would not put it past him to fly here on wings his mind will create."

"He can really do that?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"If he so desires," Tariq said with a smile. "And it is a sight to behold."

Chapter Six

Ailyn stared up at the smooth glasslike wall of the lava tube. He was bone-tired, hungry for Sustenance and his body was itching, on fire, for want of the tenerse waiting for him. He had chosen this dark place, this makeshift containment cell, because when he was in Transition, he could not scale the sheer walls nor could he spring up to the top rim that was at least two hundred feet above him. He could – however – shift into a raven at will and fly out of his self-imposed prison when the Transition had run its course. At that moment though, he was too weary to rearrange his molecules and make the change. He had to wait until he had a bit more energy before he could shift.

He sat down on a low ledge and reached out to touch the silica-rich lava flow from centuries earlier that constituted the slick walls of the cone-shaped hole that was his prison cell. The solid sheet of obsidian glass that encircled the room that was rich in iron and magnesium had been formed when the molten lava had cooled too quickly to crystallize and had created this mysterious chamber, the floor of which had bubbled up to form little ledges around the base.

"I want you to see this chamber one day, *ionúin*," he said as he trailed his fingers over the smooth surface.

Though the chamber was pitch-black with no light casting upon the chill walls, he could see well enough with his enhanced vision. The only illumination came from the top of the chamber and that was a mere glow from farther back in the cave.

A half-hour passed and his addictive need for the tenerse pushed everything else out of his mind. He knew he had to have both the blood and the tenerse as quickly as possible, and the longer he waited, the harder it would be to push aside the craving. He got up, closed his eyes and willed his body into the form of a raven, taking flight as easily as taking a breath, and when he landed, shifted once more into human form.

As always, the vac-syringe of tenerse was a fiery agony as he injected the thick drug into a vein in his neck. Even after all this time he had not grown accustomed to that stinging, burning pain and knew he never would. With trembling hands he reached for the first bottle of Sustenance and drained it in three gulps before reaching for the next one.

His addiction assuaged, his hunger fed, he fanned his hand over his hips to settle a new breechclout in place then headed back to the chamber he called his home.

* * * * *

Shanee saw the raven sitting in the mango tree looking down at her and she smiled. "Hello, little thief," she greeted it. To the Amazeen, ravens were sacred and a symbol of wisdom. It was also a legendary shape-shifter.

As that thought flitted through her mind she stared at the bird, glanced around her then whispered, "Ailyn, is that you?"

The bird turned its head to one side inquisitively then made the *cur-rak* sound that was its trademark call. It took flight and disappeared behind the hut the villagers had helped Shanee build.

Sighing with disappointment, Shanee turned away from the tree.

"Where are you going, *ionúin*?"

He was there behind her, walking toward her from the rear of the hut. He smiled when she whooped and rushed him, throwing herself into his arms and wrapping her lovely long legs around his waist before she plastered her lips to his. She was holding his face between her hands as she devoured his mouth, totally oblivious to the villagers watching them.

"Whoa, wench!" he said, pulling his lips from hers. He was supporting her shapely ass in his hands. "Much more of that and I'll be tempted to take you up against the gods-be-damned tree I was sitting in."

Shanee grinned. "That *was* you!" she said. "You were a gorgeous little fella!"

"I am an engorged big fella," he said, and pushed her bottom down on his hard erection. "Is that our hut?"

"Can you thrust into me now?" she countered as she gazed intently into his amber eyes.

"With as much power and speed as you desire, little Amazeen," he replied.

"It's our hut," she stated.

He carried her over to it, ducked down with her still clinging to him and carried her over to the pallet some of the other women had helped her stuff. Practically falling atop her, he took her to the soft surface—pulling one hand free of her ass to fan away her clothing in the blink of an eye.

"A damned fine ability you have there," she said, aware his breechclout had also disappeared.

He lay paused above her, his eyebrows drawn together. "Seeing me as a raven did not disturb you?"

She wriggled beneath him. "Hell, no! And I want to see you as a wolf," she said. "Are you as handsome as a lupine as you are as a corvine?"

"You amaze me," he said in a near whisper, his eyes roaming over her beautiful face.

"Why?" she asked. "Because I accept you as you are?"

"You have not seen me in Transition nor will you but..."

"But I will see you as a wolf," she said, "and anything else you care to show me." She nipped at his lips. "But for now, you will show me how much you missed me, *ehemann*."

For the first time in over a week Ailyn Harmattan felt at peace. There in the arms of his woman with their *Ceangal*—their Joining—on the horizon. He knew tranquility, a harmony with his nature that he had never experienced.

Her breasts were pressed flat against his bare chest, her swollen nipples burning his flesh. Those long, silky legs were still wrapped around him and she was rubbing the cleft of his rump with her heel. She held him to her, arched her hips up in invitation to his plunder and ground herself against him.

"Ah, wench," he said, unable to hold off any longer.

For the first time in Ailyn's life, he thrust his aching, stiff cock into the warm, wet channel of a woman. But it was not just any woman whose body he impaled with that hard shaft but *his* woman, *his* companion, *his* life-mate.

The sensation rocking his lower body was glorious as he withdrew and thrust into her again. The silky moistness that enveloped him, the feel of her sheath, the heat that flowed along his rod was a heady awareness that made him shudder with delight. He shoved his hand back under her hip and lifted her to him to better penetrate that luscious heaven that tightened around his turgid flesh.

He slammed his mouth down over her, thrust his tongue deep between her lips and began pumping his cock in and out of her willing body so fast and with such power, the sound of their bodies slapping together made him that much lustier.

Shanee was digging her fingernails into his bare back and her arms were so tight around him he was having difficulty breathing. Her mouth was fastened to his, her thighs squeezing his waist. She was as attached to him as any of the moles that peppered his back.

The itch was beginning high up in his belly and fingering its way down through his cock. Her honeyed warmth was milking him, drawing upon his rigid length, and he could feel the first faint wave that started somewhere near her womb then rippled down.

She cried out—her voice lost in the recesses of his mouth. She tensed—her body pushing up to meet his.

He grunted as the first spasm shook him and he felt her climax begin. It was such an intense, overpowering feeling wrapped around his cock that increased the speed of his thrusting.

The moment the release washed over her, she felt the first spurt of his juices spilling into her, the jerk of his cock, the hard power in his thighs as he strained against her. As wave after wave of pure, concentrated pleasure undulated through her, she felt his shaft pulsing hard.

Ailyn tore his mouth from hers and threw back his head, howling as he pulsated one last time within her. Pushing hard against her, stabbing his cock as far inside her as it would go, he held still as the last faint jerk signaled the end of his release.

Breathing hard, sweat glistening on his body, he rolled with her until he lay on his back with her blanketing him. She had released her hold on his waist and shoulders so that her legs and arms stretched out alongside his, his hands clasped together at the small of her back.

"By the gods, I'll never walk again," he gasped. His heart was pounding so violently, he feared it would burst.

"You'll never walk again?" she countered. She too was heaving in breath. Lowering her head to his chest, she could hear the thunderous beat beneath her ear. "You've crippled me, Harmattan." She heard him snort.

He had not slept in days and he was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open. He was drained—milked dry—and so weary he simply could no longer stay awake. He didn't try. Two more deep breaths and he was sound asleep.

Shanee lifted her head and realized he was sleeping. Tariq had told her he would not have had much sleep—if any at all—and so she gently lay her head down again and there wrapped in the safe, protected, loving embrace of his arms, fell asleep atop him.

* * * * *

Every villager on Theristes was in attendance the next night. It was close to midnight—the traditional time at which *Ceangals* were performed. Torchlight wavering from tall brass braziers on tripod bases ringed the *Ciorcal Beannaithe*—the Sacred Circle—and flickered on the pristine white stones that rimmed it. Even those who had no love of clothing were dressed in the required maize-colored robes that symbolized both thanksgiving for the couple having found one another and hope for the joy and inner harmony wished for their Joining. The high priest who would perform the ancient ceremony was dressed in the white robe that denoted his authority. The two acolytes who stood beside him were clothed in white robes with gold cord cinctures at the waist.

Quietly in the background, three young men beat the limed goat hide drumheads of the *bodhrán* with double-headed tippers, the tribal beat announcing the arrival of the groom.

For the first time in his life Ailyn Harmattan was dressed entirely in black from long-sleeved silk shirt to tight leather pants in the time-honored uniform of a Reaper warrior. He wore black boots polished to a high sheen and a black leather tie and belt. On the collars of his shirt were pinned a set of silver ravens. The only color on his ensemble was a blood-red triangle with twin silver slashes bisecting the center, near the shoulder seam of his left sleeve. He came to the gathering from the west along with his best man Tariq, who was also dressed in the stygian clothing of a Reaper.

From the east Shanee came attired in a gown of silver, her long white hair flowing freely to her hips and pinned back from ears with jasmine blossoms. She wore soft dark

gray kid slippers and in her hands was a bouquet of tropical flowers that trailed down to the hem of her gown. Following her was her matron of honor Bahiya clad in a dark rose gown that swept the ground just above her bare feet.

Ailyn's heart thudded hard in his chest as he watched his bride approaching. She was so lovely his entire body clenched with desire. The elegant gown fit her like a second skin with thin net strands of silver wire flowing from scooped neckline to the deeply scalloped hem. Sparkles of light flashed from the silver net so that as she moved, the gown sent out shards of multi-colored luminance. His palms were sweating as she drew near and he swallowed hard. He had never wanted anything in his life as much as he wanted this woman and the very soul inside him sang.

Shanee could not take her eyes from her groom. His uniform heightened the tan of his skin and the muscularity of his finely honed body. Someone had shaped his dark hair expertly so that it was absolute perfection curling gently at the collar of his silk shirt. His amber eyes glowed with an inner light that lit up his handsome face. She had never felt such love and happiness ever and her heart swelled with pride as she beheld the man with whom she would share the rest of her days.

The high priest spoke as Shanee came to stand in front of Ailyn.

"Who comes to seek the blessing of Alel on this ritual?" the high priest asked.

"I, Lord Ailyn LeVey Harmattan, Duke of Kentsington of Riezell, have come to seek the Great God's blessing."

"And I, Princess Shanee Lykopolis of the Royal House of Iphito of Amazeen, have come to seek the Great God's blessing."

Ailyn blinked. "Lykopolis?" he whispered.

"She-wolf," his soon-to-be wife whispered in reply.

"And who has come to seek a mate for the Joining?" the high priest queried.

"I, Ailyn, have come to seek a mate for the Joining."

"And I, Shanee, have come to seek a mate for the Joining."

"Who vouches for this man? What say you of him?"

"I, Tariq, Prime Reaper of Theristes. He is a good and worthy man."

"And who vouches for this woman? What say you of her?"

"I, Bahiya, mate of the Prime Reaper of Theristes. She is a good and worthy woman."

"Is there one among you who has reason to believe this Joining should not take place or that it would be invalid?" The high priest looked about him.

No one spoke.

"Since I have tested this man and found him worthy of Joining, and since he is free to take unto himself a bride, since I have tested this woman and found her worthy of Joining, and since she is free to take unto herself a groom, and since there is no one who

believes this Joining should not take place or would be invalid, I declare this Joining can be made!" the high priest proclaimed.

The ceremony was a blur for Ailyn. He mouthed the appropriate responses but his mind was on the woman at his side. Her hand in his made his entire body burn with need. Her beauty was drawing him like a moth to the flame. He had become lost in her eyes, reciting his words by rote though they came directly from his heart. As he listened to her repeat her vows to him, he felt moisture gathering in his eyes.

"Ailyn?"

He had to tear his gaze from Shanee to look at Tariq.

"Your shirt," Tariq repeated for his friend obviously had not heard him the first time.

"My shirt?" Ailyn repeated, completely at a loss.

"Unbutton your left sleeve and fold it back," Tariq said, his lips twitching with his effort not to laugh.

Though he had no idea why he should, Ailyn did as Tariq ordered more because the Prime Reaper's subliminally directed voice bid him to do so without question. He unbuttoned his shirtsleeve and folded the cuff back twice. He stared down at his bare wrist as Tariq stepped forward and slid a golden bracelet over his hand and onto his wrist.

"Where did you get these?" Ailyn asked.

"I made them for you," Tariq said as Bahiya slipped a similar band upon Shanee's arm.

"The outward sign of your union, your link to one another, your eternal reminder that you are now responsible to another for your actions, is the Band of Devotion that will be placed on each of you by your attendants. With this symbol, you will be joined for all time. Let all who witness the placement of these bands know you are one to another, forever as one, never to be parted by anything or anyone under penalty of death." The high priest laid his hands on each of the bracelets they now wore. "As this woman is now a part of you, Ailyn, and this man a part of you, Shanee, so shall these bracelets be a part of you. As your wife and your husband may not be taken from you, so must these bracelets never be removed for they are the symbols of eternal union sanctioned by the gods, endorsed by Reaper Law, witnessed by those gathered and blessed by my own hands as a representative of Alel on this world." He lifted Ailyn's and Shanee's arms above their heads. "Before gods and man, I declare this man and woman husband and wife," the high priest pronounced. "May nothing sever their Joining!"

A loud resounding cheer rang out over those assembled.

It was a very sweet, chaste kiss that bound them together before the villagers. Their lips touched briefly but their eyes were locked in a fiery dance of passion that made them both shiver.

"I love you," Ailyn told his bride.

"As I love you," she said.

"Feast!" someone called out, and before another word could be spoken by the couple, eager hands latched on to them and escorted them to the long plank tables where thick cushions on the ground eagerly awaited the diners.

Long into the early hours of the morning the villagers celebrated the Joining. The food that had been prepared by the women was excellent and filling, the wine free-flowing and heady. Music added to the festive air and couples broke away from the tables to dance to the live jigs played with *bodhráns*, tin whistles, concertinas, fiddles and *uilleann* pipes. Children scampered about long past their bedtimes on such a wondrous occasion as a wedding and played tag with one another.

In the spreading mango tree where Ailyn in his raven form had sat the day before, another man now sat with his body close to the trunk. No one saw him there in the tree for he had placed around him a cloak of mist so that should anyone look his way, he would be well hidden from their view. He sat there watching the festivities until the Joining couple rose from the table and walked toward their hut. His hungry gaze followed Shanee until the Reaper swept his bride up into his arms and carried her into the hut.

Fierce longing for what he knew he could never have flooded the watcher and he sighed deeply before vanishing in a swirling mist of black vapor.

* * * * *

Ailyn set his lady gently on her feet and put his hands to her cheeks to pull her face slowly to his. The kiss he gave her was no less chaste or soft than the one he'd given after the Joining. It was a reverent kiss that held passionate promise.

"What's on your mind, *ehemann*?" she asked as he stepped back and swept his gaze down her silver net gown.

"Ripping that beautiful thing from your body, but it is too stunning. Where did you come by it?"

Shanee smiled. "Would you believe Jared fashioned it as you do my clothes from time to time?"

Ailyn's left brow quirked up. "Jared?"

"He came to me and asked that I envision the perfect Joining gown and said he would create it for me from my thoughts as a wedding gift." She smoothed her hands down the gown's skirt. "This is what came from our collaboration."

"Is he...?" He shrugged and flung out a hand. "You know."

"He prefers men, aye," she said with a smile. "And he has his cap set for Colton."

"Colton, the Barbarian?" he asked, his eyes wide. "The body builder who looks like a rhino?"

"The one and the same," she said. "They've been keeping company for about a year now."

Ailyn released a long breath. "I kinda thought Jared was a bit—well, you know—with that odd hairstyle of his."

Shanee turned her back. "There won't be any ripping of this fine creation so unbutton me so my daughter can wear this..." She stopped realizing what she'd been about to say then shook her head firmly. "My daughter-in-law-to-be can wear this gown."

He put his hands on her shoulders and drew her back against him. "Does it hurt you that we can only have sons?" he asked. He lowered his head and placed a soft kiss on her shoulder.

"I won't lie to you, *ehemann*," she said. "I have always wanted a daughter but I am not bemoaning the fact it isn't to be."

"I'll give you as many sons as you'll ever want," he said, and slid his hands to the myriad silver buttons that ranged from neckline to waist and began undoing them.

"Three, maybe four, will be enough," she said with a little laugh.

When he had the buttons undone, he slipped his hand to her shoulder and pushed the gown down her arms and chest. Once over her shapely hips, it fell into a shimmering pool at her feet and he drew in a ragged breath.

"Shanee!" he gasped.

She turned and stepped out of the circle of her gown. "Aye?" she asked as she kicked off her slippers.

Ailyn's gaze turned hot as the fires of the Abyss. His lady had worn nothing at all beneath the silvery gown and she had shaved away the lush triangle that had graced her lower body.

"Why did you...?" He could not stop himself from turning his hand and placing his palm against her bare juncture. He was stunned to find her already wet for him.

"As much as I like that uniform, *ehemann*, I'd just as soon you do your molecular thingie and..."

She didn't get a chance to finish for Ailyn flung out his free hand and the black silk shirt and black leather pants, tie, belt and boots were history. He stood there with the largest erection she'd seen between his thighs to date.

"Hot damn, Harmattan," she said, flicking out a tongue to lick her lips.

His attention dipped to her mouth and he growled low and deep in his throat. He slapped his hands to her hips and—as though she weighed no more than a leaf on the wind—lifted her and slid her down on his erection. He backed her up to the roof post, slamming into her with force, dragging her legs up around his waist as he thrust, his cheek pressed to her chest.

He was a rock-hard missile enveloped in velvet as he slid in and out of her. The smell of his juices mingling with hers added to her need. His cock was deliciously long

and more than adequate in circumference so it filled her and began to satisfy the ache that still pulsed between her legs. Tremors of delight shot through her as the quickening came fast and furious, following speedily by his own climax that had him pounding her firmly against the wall. Grunting with each forward thrust, he finally stilled as her last quiver drained him and he sagged against her, his heart trip-hammering against her chest.

"Consummated and uncontestable," he said from between clenched teeth.

"What?" she asked, panting.

"Our Joining, wench," he said, allowing her to slide down his spent body, he held her against him until they were both ready to move apart, each still breathing heavily. "You are mine."

"Aye," she said. "As you are mine."

"Damned straight," he panted.

She took his hand and led him to their pallet, blowing out the candle on the table to plunge the hut into semidarkness. "My cunt is going to be as sore as a thumb smashed by a hammer before our honeymoon is over," she admitted.

"Are you bragging or complaining?" he asked, trying to hide a yawn. He enfolded her within the perimeter of his arms and put his chin on the top of her head.

"Well, that's one thing that is going to stop now that we're Joined," she said as she lay down beside him on the pallet and put her head on his shoulder.

"Meaning?"

"You not getting enough sleep," she stated. "You stay tired all the time and to keep up with me, warrior, you're going to need your rest."

He yawned again, unable to stop himself. "Wench, it's nearly four of the morning. Don't you think I have a right to be a bit tired?"

"Shut your mouth and close your eyes and don't snore," she said, snuggling into his arms.

"I don't snore," he mumbled.

"The hell you don't," she said. "You make enough noise I can't even hear the gods-be-damned waterfall behind us."

"I don't snore," he repeated, and was quiet for a few moments. "You do, but I don't."

Shanee jerked her head up and glared at him. "I do not!"

"Like the proverbial buzz saw," he said, putting a hand to her head and forcing her cheek to his shoulder again.

"No," she stated firmly.

Ailyn smiled and closed his eyes. He was almost asleep when he heard her snort.

"I do *not* snore," she declared.

Chapter Seven

He woke her as he sat bolt upright on the pallet, dragging harsh breaths into his lungs, gulping air. He was covered with sweat and he was trembling as though chilled. She got up and lit the candle, turning to look down at him as he sat there with his arms wrapped around his bare chest.

"Ailyn," she said in a firm tone. "I want you to tell me what you dreamed."

He shook his head like an errant schoolboy.

"Aye, you will," she said then came to sit down beside him. This was not the first time he had awakened her in that manner but usually he'd lay right back down. Tonight she had seen added trembling, sweating and a look in his eyes that made her uneasy. "Tell me."

"No," he said. He met her gaze. "You didn't tell me what else you did while I was gone."

"You aren't going to change the subject, *ehemann*," she told him.

"Aye, I am," he declared. "What else did you do?" He tightened his arms around himself.

Shanee realized he was slowly rocking back and forth as he sat there and knew he wasn't even aware that he did so. A portion of a conversation she'd had with Bahiya a few days before passed through her mind.

"With Reapers, sometimes you have to give in order to get," the Prime Reaper's mate had imparted. *"When you need to get answers from your man, give him what he wants. Eventually, he'll give you what you want."*

The Amazeen crossed her legs as she sat facing him. "I helped the men build this hut."

Ailyn looked up at the pole rafters and at the layered walls. "You did well. What else?"

"I helped the women gather the leaves and grasses for the pallet then stuffed most of it myself."

He nodded but made no comment to that.

She ached to touch him, to put her arms around him in his apparent misery but she refrained, instinctively knowing he wouldn't appreciate it just then.

"Oh and a scout ship landed the fourth day you were gone," she said, and smiled at him as he turned his head to look at her. "They had a message for me from General Strom so I went on board and spoke to him privately."

"What did he want?" he asked, reaching up to arm away the sweat that had gathered under his chin.

"He wanted to know if you were going to return to Riezell with me. I told him you would but that you had no intention of seeing your mother. I explained to him why you thought she wanted you back and he said he'd already come to the same conclusion. He is agreeable to keeping your return secret from the vice-counselor and your mother."

"That would be best," he said.

"Now tell me about the dream, Ailyn," she ordered.

At first she didn't think he'd answer but he hung his head, closed his eyes and began a tale that would keep her awake the rest of the night.

"Tariq had been on R-9 for thirty years or more when they brought the first of us there," he began in a soft, toneless voice. "I don't know who the scientists were but I know they had done experiments on him off and on over those years. He says they didn't know what to do with him until a new scientist arrived about six months before I was brought there."

She watched him get up and go to the table to pour a tumbler of water. His hand was shaking violently and he gulped the liquid down as though he were parched. Draining the tumbler, he poured another and drank that as well. He seemed a bit calmer when he returned to the pallet and sank down on it again.

"Her name was Perse Cean," he told her. "She was half Saurian and half something even more bizarre."

Shanee had only met one Saurian and she had been uncomfortable with the reptilian warrior. With his black, elliptical eyes, hairless face covered in thick, shiny scales, broad and fleshy tongue that was four times the length of a normal humanoid's and long, spatula-like fingers, the Saurian was the ugliest creature she'd ever seen. When he spoke with a hissing sound, she nearly gagged seeing the pebbly warts and double rows of sharp, spiky teeth inside his mouth.

"I overheard her and the three assistants who came to R-9 with her discussing their homeworld. From what they said it is where Raphian is worshiped as the primary god."

Shanee frowned. "Where is that?"

"A place far beyond Esvaria in the Diamhair Galaxy," he replied. "She called it Chiaroscuro but I've studied every star map I could get my hands on since I came to Theristes and I can't find it listed anywhere."

"Tariq has star maps here?" she asked.

"The Burgon gave him an entire library of information. He said he never again wanted Tariq and his people not to know where they were in relation to others in the megaverse."

"Makes sense," Shanee said.

"It had been Bakari's predecessor who brought Cean," he continued. "The gods only know where he found her but she was the one who did the first Transference."

She remembered what Tariq had told her...

"The only explanation I can give you for what happened on R-9 is that Raphian was involved. He influenced the Alliance to create the hell that was Riezell-Nine."

"Were you among the first ones they did that to?" she asked.

He ran a hand through his hair and she was glad to see he was no longer shaking.

"When they brought me in—more dead than alive—they threw me in a holding tank with eight other men. All of us had been severely wounded and none of us were expected to live. There was one among us who took it upon himself to make sure we knew who each of us was. He said we shouldn't die alone without having friends to mourn us. His name was Creighton and he and I swam against one another in a couple of meets. Marcus and Damian were about the same age as me—twenty-four, twenty-five. You've met them, haven't you?" At her nod, he continued. "Three others were older by a score of years and the remaining three were in their mid to late thirties. When Cean and her assistants came to take a look at us, she pointed to the three older ones and they were taken out first. The next day they came back for the next three and then finally the day after that for Marcus, Damian and then me." He took a deep breath then released it slowly. "I was the ninth to receive a parasite."

There was no need for him to tell her about that again but there was something he was holding back, something that bothered him so deeply his eyes were filled with tears. She broke down and laid her hand on his thigh.

"Tell me," she said gently.

"It was her hands," he said. "Her hands were ice cold and even through the latex gloves I could feel that chill and the roughness of those gods-awful scales." He shuddered and a solitary tear slid down his left cheek. "She would put those terrible hands on me, Shanee. She would drain me and there wasn't anything I could do about it because I was shackled to the exam table with my legs pulled wide." More tears fell down his cheeks. "She would flick that long, forked tongue over me and I would scream until I was hoarse but she never stopped until I ejaculated." He buried his face in his hands. "The gods help me but I couldn't hold it."

She scooted closer to him and put her arms around him. "It's over with, *ehemann*," she said. "That won't ever happen to you again. Don't think about her impaling herself on you. Think about..."

"She didn't slither her warty cunt on me, Shanee," he denied, looking at her. "Oh god, I would have died if she'd touched me like that! She masturbated me. I would lie there and come and one of her assistants would harvest the sperm."

That seemed worse to Shanee but she tried not to let her revulsion show. She stroked his back and crooned to him, feeling his tears falling on her thigh as she held his head to her shoulder.

"It is over, Ailyn," she said. "Let it go."

"I wish I could but I dream about Cean and those three bastards she called the Ceannus. One of the males was the most savage, cruel being you could ever imagine. His name was Lexis Acklard and he really liked to hurt me. He stank like a nest of vipers—he had that odor about him. He would scrape his hands over me and those scales would rip open my skin. When the nightmares come, it's as though I can feel the scales dragging over me again, cutting me."

She wanted to get his mind off such things. "Where did Cean and her assistants go when that portion of R-9 was shutdown?"

He drew in a hitching breath. "When Bakari became Burgon and ordered the Transferences to stop, the scientists received word that he was sending in an inspection team to make sure the Reapers were being cared for. We had all been in isolation cells all along but Tariq had been able to keep in contact with all except three of us—the first three men Cean took from our holding cell."

"The older men."

"Aye," he said, and straightened up, moving away from her touch. "Malachi was the youngest of them then Klaus. The oldest was Jules." He shrugged. "I don't remember last names or where the others were from but Jules was from Serenia."

"What happened to them?"

"She had reserved a special place in hell for those men," he said. "She had used them for an entirely different set of experiments than just the Transference of the parasites. She knew once he found out what she'd done, Bakari would charge her with crimes against humanity and so she and her Ceannus just vanished along with Malachi and Klaus. They had gone into Jules' cell to retrieve him too but he was in such bad shape they didn't want to bother with him. To cover up what they'd been doing to him, they doused him with an accelerant and set fire to him, hoping to destroy the evidence of their evil."

"Oh my god, did he die?"

Ailyn shook his head. "No, he survived. His queen healed him of the burns." He let out a ragged breath. "He's here on Theristes but he keeps well away from the villagers, never allowing them to see him. He is..." He wiped a hand over his face. "Before Cean got her hands on him, he was a nice-looking man. Now? Now, he is not a pleasant sight."

"Oh Ailyn. What did she do to him?"

"It would be easier to tell you what she didn't do to him," Ailyn said. "At some point, she broke every bone in his body. She tortured that man in ways you couldn't begin to imagine. The most revolting thing was to somehow mesh a portion of her DNA with his, mutating his body and changing the complete physical structure. The results are horrifying. She performed her hideous experiments on him before she gave him a parasite else the queen would not have allowed his body to change as it did."

"And she got away with it," she said, shaking her head.

"No one knows where she went but Bakari put a five million *cúirs* bounty out on her. With the gods' help, maybe one day she'll be brought to justice." He shrugged. "Wherever she is, I don't even think Morigunia can touch her. The Burgon told us he won't bother charging her with her crimes if she's ever found. He will simply burn her alive as she did Jules."

He fell silent and finally lay back down, putting his hands over his face. She could tell he was exhausted and got up to blow out the candle again. Returning to the bed, she held her arms out.

"Come here, *ehemann*," she said. "Let your lady hold you."

Ailyn turned over so his head rested on her breast. His right arm went over her waist, his right leg over her thigh. He went to sleep with her arms around him.

The next morning, they made the trek back over the mountain to Ailyn's cave. They had another week and some odd days before the LRC would return for Shanee and they wanted to spend it alone together. It was on the third night they were home that Shanee woke and could not get back to sleep. She tossed and turned then finally got up from their pallet, not wanting to wake Ailyn for since his confession to her about Cean and her assistants, he had been sleeping soundly all through the night.

Brewing herself a cup of tea, she took the mug and walked outside the cave and to the banks of the stream. She sat down on a rock, stretched out her long legs and took a sip of the piping hot beverage. There was a full moon overhead and the water was like a silver ribbon as it flowed past the place where she sat.

It was the sudden cessation of the chirping and clicking of insects that caught her immediate attention. The night air was perfectly still, not a leaf rustling on the trees. Turning her head slowly to the left, she was surprised to see a crouched figure passing furtively through the stand of trees. She watched it move with quiet stealth toward the cave's entrance, completely unaware of her presence there at the stream.

As cautiously as she could, she set the cup of tea down and stood. She mentally cursed herself for she'd brought no weapon with her. The threat that was moving toward the cave entrance both angered and alarmed her. Her mate was inside and sleeping, unaware danger was lurking nearby.

Moving just as carefully and silently, she followed, her hands doubled into fists at her side, her naked body tense and primed for a fight. If her ancestors could fight unclothed and unarmed, she thought, so could she.

She stopped when the figure stopped. Holding her breath, she stood perfectly still as the one she'd been following slowly turned and looked straight at her. She didn't think she could be seen for she was hidden beneath the spreading branches of an orange tree. For the longest time there was no movement from either the dark figure or Shanee. There was no sound. Finally, the one at the entrance to the cave seemed to be content there was no danger and turned around, sweeping aside the hanging curtain of vines that hung over the cave entrance. As the vines parted, moonlight glinted off

something in the figure's hand and Shanee's heart accelerated. She lunged forward, intent on tackling whoever or whatever was trying to gain access to her home and Ailyn.

Startled by the sudden rush of sound behind it, the figure sprang aside and started to dart back into the lush foliage to the side of the cave, dropping whatever it had been holding. It turned back, bent down to scoop up what it had dropped and it was at that moment that it came face-to-face with Ailyn Harmattan's bride.

Shanee was running so hard she nearly slammed face first into the cave. Her hands slapped against the rock but years of military training pivoted her around, expecting the figure to attack her. It was only a few feet away from her—its face fully lit by the moonlight—and what she saw made the Amazeen cry out in shock.

Time stood still as Shanee stared with wide eyes and opened mouth at the nightmarish form. Her heart seemed to have ceased beating and for the first time in her life knew what true fear was. She nearly fainted when she felt strong hands on her shoulders—tightening almost painfully—and dragging her back against a rock-hard body. She would have screamed had not Ailyn's soft voice shushed her.

"Good eve, Jules," she heard her husband say.

The deformed man half hidden in the thick bushes moved backward another step and made a grunting noise as he straightened out of his crouch. He was clutching something metallic against his broad chest.

"My lady-wife was intent on protecting me," Ailyn said. "She is an Amazeen."

Shanee could not take her eyes from the monstrosity facing her. Over seven feet in height with very muscular arms and legs, he had pale gray flesh covered in what appeared to be wiry tendrils that covered him from head to toe. He had leathery lips and a broad, flat nose with a triple row of vented nostrils thrust out from beneath almond-shaped black eyes that had no pupils. His ears were pointed and twitched like those of a cat. His very large hands had exceedingly long fingers though his thumb was short and flanged out at the tip. One thick, strange-looking plait of jagged scales fell from the top of his head to just below his hips. He wore a breechclout over his genitals and it was obvious to her that he was very well endowed.

"This is Shanee," Ailyn said.

There was a low, warbling grunt from Jules. He took another step back as though prepared to run at any moment.

"Would you like to come inside?" Ailyn asked.

The horror that had once been an exceedingly handsome man shook his head vehemently, his long plait whipping as though it were a viper.

Shanee shook off her husband's grip and stepped forward, stilling when Jules once more stepped back. She held out her hand. "Hello, Jules," she managed to say. She tried to smile but her face felt frozen.

Jules looked down at her hand then cocked his head to one side. His dark eyes were like stygian pools in his cinereous face. When she came closer, he thrust what he was holding out to her.

Taken aback by the sudden movement, Shanee jumped. Her gaze fell to the thing in his overly large hands and she had to caution herself not to cringe when she saw the long, pointed red claws that grew from his fingers.

With another grunt and one step toward Shanee, Jules straightened to his full height and his chin lifted. He moved his offering toward her.

Shanee realized what he was holding out to her, what had flashed so dangerously in the moonlight, was an eight by ten piece of flattened tin. Her forehead wrinkled as she reached for it. In her hands it was very warm and she realized that like Ailyn and all Reapers, his body temperature was much higher than a humanoid's. She felt her husband move up behind her.

Jules seemed to be swaying back and forth from foot to foot and his movement reminded her of a little boy anxious for his mother to see what he had brought her.

She held the flattened tin so she could see it clearly in the moonlight and her lips parted. She stared at the surface of the tin then slowly lifted her gaze to Jules. "You did this?" she asked.

The hideously deformed man bobbed his head and grunted again.

Shanee turned her head and looked at Ailyn. "Look," she said.

What she held in her hand was an intricately designed and executed punched and pierced tin portrait of Ailyn and Shanee looking at one another during their Joining. They were holding hands with the waterfall and the lake in the background. The portrait was so lifelike, so perfectly precise and carefully crafted with an oval Gaelach knotwork pattern enclosing the couple. At the top left corner was an ancient Claddagh symbol and on the top right was a trinity knot of entwined hearts. On the bottom left corner were their names and on the bottom right the date. The craftsmanship was superb, the most beautiful thing either Ailyn or Shanee had ever seen.

"Oh Jules," she whispered. "It is exquisite."

Ailyn met the other man's eyes. "Thank you, my friend. We will hang it in a place of honor in our home and think of you."

Jules grunted again, shrugged and then turned to go.

"Wait!" Shanee called out and before the misshapen man could flee, she was in front of him, standing on tiptoe with her hands on his upper arms so she could place a soft kiss on his leather tendril cheek.

Too astonished that this beautiful woman would deign to touch him much less put her lips to him, Jules just stood there staring at her. She was smiling at him as though he were a normal man and he put his hand up to the place where her lips had touched him.

"Thank you," she said. "I will treasure your gift always."

With a sound that was more whimper than grunt, he whipped around and was gone, leaving nothing behind but an eerie black mist that fell like rain to the jungle floor.

Shanee turned back to her husband and just looked at him.

"He comes here now and then," Ailyn said. "Not often. Only I suppose whenever he can't take the loneliness. It's been months since I've seen him. He lives at the base of the stream."

"C-can he talk?" she asked.

"Aye, but it is so garbled you have to listen carefully," he replied. "I'm used to it."

She came toward him and he took her hand. The wedding gift from Jules was clasped to her chest. Together they went back into the cave and when they were in the chamber where they slept, Shanee took the portrait and propped it on a stone ledge in a prominent place. She ran the tips of her fingers across the lovely artwork.

"He is so talented," she said.

"Aye, he is," Ailyn agreed.

"And so very lonely," she said.

Ailyn didn't answer. He had heard her voice break and when she turned and threw herself at him, sobbing as though her heart would break, he enclosed her in his arms and crooned to her.

"I hate that bitch for doing that to him!" she said.

He held her for a long time as she cried for a man whose plight had touched her very soul.

Chapter Eight

The LRC *Midian* returned for Shanee far sooner than she would have liked. Her thirty days of R&R were over and she had to leave the paradise that was Theristes and the friends she had made on the lush, tropical world. She would miss Tariq and Bahiya, Jared, Damian and the others. And though he had not returned to visit again, she would miss the lonely man who lived at the base of the stream.

Dressed once more in her gray Riezell Guardian uniform that she had not worn since her first days on Theristes, her entire bearing seemed to be changing as she stepped on board the LRC. Her face was rigid, her lips clamped together.

Ailyn—clothed in the immaculate black uniform of a Reaper—was characteristically quiet as he walked with his lady up the ramp and onto the ship.

Captain Bartlett met Shanee and Ailyn on the bridge and put out a hand to the Reaper. “I am pleased to hear you will be returning home, Lieutenant,” he said, shaking Ailyn’s hand. He nodded at Shanee and acknowledged her with a quick nod. He knew the Amazeen did not shake hands with men.

“Thank you, Sir, but I think my commission ended when I was believed dead,” Ailyn said.

“Not so,” Bartlett replied. “You are still on the roster since no body was ever found and you might be interested to know that you will be receiving all back pay due you upon your return to Riezell.”

Ailyn nodded. “It’s good to know I won’t be penniless.”

Shanee snorted and when Ailyn shot her a warning look, she told the captain she would be showing Ailyn to their quarters.

Bartlett’s face turned hard. “No, Colonel, you will not,” the captain of the *Midian* stated. “I do not allow unmarried people to cohabit on my ship. I firmly believe...”

“The lieutenant and I were duly married before gods and man on Theristes, Captain,” Shanee interrupted. “It is our legal right to bunk together and we intend to do just that. If you have a problem, you may take it up with General Strom.”

There was a relieved sigh from the captain. It was obvious he didn’t want to tangle with the Amazeen. “Well, all right. I am pleased to know something so wonderful came from your trip out here.”

“Will there be anything else?” Shanee snapped, and when the captain shook his head, she asked when the *Midian* would be lifting off.

“We had a slight problem with our main thrusters so we’ll most likely be here a few hours longer,” was the reply.

"Good," Shanee said. "There are some things I need to do before we leave." She indicated the elevator at the rear of the bridge. "Let's get settled in, *ehemann*."

"Oh by the way, Lieutenant," the captain called out. "We've stored in plenty of tenses and Sustenance for you and there is a containment cell if you need it during the trip."

"He won't," Shanee said, and urged him to walk.

Ailyn looked at her but said nothing. He had noticed the change in the tone of her voice. It wasn't soft or feminine as he was accustomed to hearing it and now held a slight disdain and haughtiness that caught his full attention. As they took the elevator up to her quarters on Level Four he even noticed her shoulders and back were now ramrod straight, making her appear untouchable. He was surprised at the size of his wife's quarters as they entered. He looked around him and whistled.

"Not bad, little Amazeen. I was expecting nothing more than a bunk and a table."

"I am the Primary Riezell Guardian," she said with her chin lifted. "The military caters to me."

A slow, sensual grin spread over the Reaper's full lips. "Is that so?"

"Aye, it is so," she stated imperially at his lifted brow. "Don't give me that look, Harmattan."

He moved closer to her and slid his arms around her waist. "I understand the appearance you must present outside these walls, *ionúin*, but inside them, remember who the husband is and who is the wife."

She gave him a stiff look. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying that outside these walls I will be a dutiful husband and respect you for the position you hold. I will never undermine that position nor will I question it. But when we are alone, you are not the Primary Riezell Guardian and I am not the target you were sent to retrieve. I am your husband, your mate." He pulled her close and lowered his lips to her neck, whispering against her flesh. "I am your lover."

Chills wiggled down Shanee's side and her knees felt weak as his lips trailed over her skin. Her hands were pressed between them and beneath her palm she could feel his stalwart heart beating calmly and steady.

"I can be a bitch," she warned him.

"I imagine you can," he replied, and moved his lips to her ear where he caught the soft lobe between his teeth.

"I can be arrogant and..." She stopped as he thrust his tongue into her ear and she shuddered beneath his gentle assault. "Ailyn, don't."

"Why not?" he whispered. "It is my legal right to seduce you and I intend to do just that."

She pushed him back, surprised when he allowed her to do so. She put up a hand and shook her finger at him. "Behave, *ehemann*. There will be time for that but right now there are things I must do before we leave Theristes."

He shrugged as though it didn't matter. "All right." He looked about him. "Where is the vid-com?"

A bit disappointed that he had given in so quickly, Shanee frowned. "Over there."

Ailyn glanced at the screen to which she was pointing and grunted. "Things have changed since I was last on a starship." His eyebrows drew together. "Where is the keyboard?"

"A keyboard is not required," she said. "Vid-com on!"

The screen went from black to a pearly gray and a woman's face appeared. "How may I help you, Colonel?"

Shanee indicated her mate. "This is my husband Lieutenant Harmattan. He wishes to..." She turned and looked at him. "What is it you wish to do?"

Ailyn thrust his hands into the pockets of his black leather trousers. "I would like to catch up on what's been happening since I was away."

His wife nodded curtly. "Good idea. Vid-com, access historical data from twenty-one years earlier so the lieutenant can view them. Provide whatever assistance he needs."

"Understood, Colonel," the vid-com replied.

"On standby then," Shanee said, and the figure on the screen froze.

"Cybot?" he inquired, staring at the screen.

"Class 8 construct," she answered. "Have a seat at the desk and when you're ready, just tell her what you want to see."

He nodded. "Okay." When she started for the door he asked when she'd return.

"When I have accomplished what I need to do," she said, and then softened the answer with a smile.

After she was gone, Ailyn went over to the desk and leaned against it, his arms now folded over his chest. "Vid-com?" he said in an authoritative voice.

The woman on the screen smiled and she became animated again. "Aye, Lieutenant?"

"I need to know everything you have on the wreck of the *Abroholos* and any information on its crew, especially Kiefer and Ailyn Harmattan. When you have pulled that up, see what you can find on Captain Jules Guerrier of the *Cierzo*."

* * * * *

Shanee made her way down to engineering and demanded the chief engineer's attention. "Do you have metal sheeting on board?" she asked.

Chief Norris frowned. "What kind of sheeting are you looking for, Colonel?"

"What do you have?" she countered.

"Tin, brass, copper, titanium, bronze, stainless steel," the chief replied. "What do you want to use it for?"

"Artwork and crafts," she said, lifting her chin to dare him to comment.

"Then I would suggest tin, copper and aluminum, Ma'am," he responded. He scratched his cheek. "Is this for someone here on Theristes?"

"Aye," she snapped.

"Will he or she be needing some tools for this artwork and crafts?"

"Why?"

"Well, I just happen to have a set of boxwood tools sitting in storage. One of the yeomen left it behind when she transferred off the *Midian*. They're just sitting down there gathering dust."

Shanee looked away from the man. "Can you cut the metal into eight by ten and fourteen by sixteen sheets? I will need at least twenty of each metal."

"Aye, Ma'am, I can. That's gonna be pretty heavy to tote but..."

"I've got that handled," Shanee told him. "Just get that cut ASAP. I want it done before liftoff."

"Aye, aye, Colonel," he agreed.

Her next stop was at requisitioning and she was annoyed that there were two people ahead of her in line. She barged past them. "I am in a hurry," she stated.

The two people who had been waiting stepped back, fearful of incurring the wrath of a Riezell Guardian and an Amazeen at that.

"Aye, aye, Colonel," the storekeeper responded quickly. "How may I help you?"

"I want to see your 'bot forms," Shanee stated.

* * * * *

When the *Midian* took to the skies, the cybot Shanee had purchased, programmed and sent down to Theristes via the transporter, was making its way along the streambed toward the little thatched hut where Jules Guerrier sat in perfect amazement. He knew a 'bot when he saw it and as the LRC soared past overhead, he figured he knew from where this had come.

"Greetings, Jules," the 'bot said as it came striding forward, its arms loaded with metal sheets upon which sat a small wooden box. "Compliments of Ailyn and Shanee." The 'bot stopped and looked around. "Where may I place these, Jules?"

Getting slowly to his feet, Jules pointed to the hut.

"Very good," the 'bot said in a jovial voice. It disappeared into the hut then came out again and over to Jules. It held out its hand. "Hello. You may give me the name of your choice."

Unable to make his scarred vocal cords work, all he could do was think the name but apparently that was all the 'bot needed for it plucked his thoughts from the ether.

"Michelle it is," the 'bot said. It tilted its head to one side. "I like that name, Jules."

He watched the 'bot sit down right next to the spot where he'd been sitting and working on a tin punch of Shanee's beautiful face.

The 'bot patted the place beside it. "Come sit with me, Jules. I would like to see what you are working on."

Though it had been many years since he'd seen a 'bot, he knew this one had to be top of the line. The artificial skin covering its arms and legs looked real and the sparkle in its blue eyes and the luster of its blonde hair was so lifelike, it was hard to imagine it wasn't genuine. Even down to the bright red fingernail and toenail polish, the 'bot looked like a real woman—a real, beautiful woman with pearly white teeth, high cheekbones tinted with rouge, ruby red lips, shapely legs and breasts that made his mouth water.

All he could do was shake his head.

The 'bot frowned. "You aren't pleased with me, Jules? I am anatomically correct you know and I was made for you."

Jules' dark eyes widened. He made a strangled sound in his throat.

"I find you desirable and I am yours," Michelle whispered as she laid her soft, gentle hand on his thigh.

* * * * *

Ailyn studied his wife as she came into their quarters. He knew perfectly well where she'd gone and what she had planned to do before she had left him earlier. Reading minds came in handy when someone was acting secretly. He would allow her to tell him what she'd done if she wanted to but if she did not, he would bide his time.

"I programmed her to play chess and backgammon and a thousand or so other games," Shanee said as she began unbuttoning her tunic.

"He likes chess," her husband commented. "I wasn't much of a challenge for him."

"I programmed her with as many jokes as the data bank had but I'll check on Riezell when we get back to see if there are other jokes." She peeled off her tunic and laid it aside. "He needs to laugh."

"That he does," Ailyn said, his voice thick with emotion. He watched her sit on the settee to pull off her boots.

"I had them put a vid-com link in so he could access information like you wanted to know and he can listen to music or view movies if he's of the mind to do so," she said as she stood up. She unhooked the button on her trousers then stepped out of them. "The 'bot can tell him how to use her."

Ailyn grinned. "You don't think he'll know how to use her?" he asked. He wagged his brows when she looked over at him.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Harmattan," she sniffed.

"Well, it's like riding a horse. Once done, never forgotten," he replied.

She stilled and stared at him. "You know how to ride a horse?"

"Of course," he answered.

Her eyes brightened. "I have a stallion I keep at the stables near Tramond on Riezell. We'll get you one too!"

"I'd like that," he told her.

As was her habit, she wore nothing between her flesh and uniform and she came over to him where he sat at the desk and threw her leg over his thighs, straddling him. "Now, what shall we do?"

He circled her in his arms and laced his fingers together behind her. His amber eyes were filled with an emotion she was having difficulty reading until he thanked her.

"For what?"

"For making Jules' life more bearable for him. He's been a good friend and I was worried that he'd have no one to talk to or with whom to interact until we returned to Theristes to visit."

She leaned her forehead against his. "My heart ached for him. I wanted to help him."

"You programmed the 'bot to accept him as he is and that is the greatest gift that man has ever received. He will bless you 'til the day he is no more and if there is an afterlife, he will continue to bless you there. You've given him something he will treasure."

"As I treasure the portrait he made for us."

With her in his arms, Ailyn got up from the chair and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He walked with her into the bedchamber where the lights were turned down low. He took her to the bed. Shanee let her legs slide from his hips. Her hands went to the buttons of his black silk shirt.

"Where's your tie?" she asked as she made her way down the buttons.

"On your desk along with the gods-be-damned belt," he said.

She glanced down at his bare toes. "You can't run around on the ship with a breechclout, you know," she warned him.

"I don't see why not," he replied as she pushed his shirt over his shoulders.

"Female crewmen are why not," she stated. "Lest you want to be raped every time you venture from these quarters."

"You have too much faith in my seductive abilities, *ionúin*," he said with a snort.

"No breechclout," she ordered. "You need to accustom yourself to wearing clothes, you pervert."

He sighed heavily. "I suppose so." Her fingers were on the closure of his trousers and as she undid his fly, he looked down at the top of her glossy white hair. As she

peeled the garment down his legs—squatting as she tugged—he put his hands in those luxurious albescent tresses. “I love your hair,” he whispered.

She was hunkered on the floor at his feet as he stepped out of his trousers. She tossed the black leather pants aside and put her hands up to his semierect shaft and heavy balls.

“And I love these,” she said, taking him into her mouth.

Ailyn drew in a short breath and felt his body tremble beneath her soft, warm and wet attention. Her tongue was laving his hardening flesh as her palm cupped him to massage his sac, her lips flexing around him.

“No, baby,” he said, his voice gruff. He reached down and tugged at her shoulders until she released him, giving him a petulant look as he lifted her to her feet.

“Ailyn...” she protested.

“In you,” he said. “I want my cock to be in you.”

And he got his way.

Captain Bartlett rang to ask the newlyweds to join him for the evening meal in the ship’s VIP dining hall. “It will just be the five of us,” he said. “Our healer and my 2-I-C will be joining us.”

Shanee had wanted to decline but Ailyn told her it would be discourteous to do so. He didn’t want to go either and said as much.

“Then why are we going?” she grumbled.

“To make nice,” he said as he watched her slipping back into her uniform. He was already dressed in his with the simple wave of his hand but she had refused to allow him to dress her in that way.

“I’d get spoiled,” she told him.

Ailyn shrugged. “I like spoiling you but I understand.”

When the elevator arrived on Deck Four, there was a man already in the cage. He nodded but did not speak, moving back as Ailyn escorted his lady in. With their backs to him, the couple stared at the mat finish on the titanium doors. It was Shanee who moved first, turning to push Ailyn away before spinning around to confront the man whose hand gripped an obsidian dagger.

Ailyn hit the opposite wall of the elevator cage with his right shoulder and bounced off it, falling back to land on his ass on the floor. The force of his collision with the wall had sent a numbing pain all the way down to his fingers. Grabbing his hurt arm with his other hand, he stared up at his lady as she struggled with the man who was striving to stab his blade downward toward Shanee. Before Ailyn could get to his feet, the elevator came to a halt, settled and the door opened, spilling the Amazeen and her protagonist out into the corridor. He gasped as he saw his wife falling backward with the man atop her. Scrambling to his feet, he reached out to grab the man’s shoulders to pull him off Shanee. With a growl, he spun the man away from his wife.

"Cocksucking scum!" Shanee snarled as she was jerked up by her husband's pull on the assailant. She used every ounce of her strength to twist the man's wrist until the blade he'd intended to use was imbedded to the hilt in his own heart.

The man looked down with disbelief at the dagger buried in him then lifted his eyes to Shanee. "You bitch," he whispered. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Breathing heavily, the Riezell Guardian rolled off the dead man and sprang to her feet. Her husband was staring at her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded and bent over to pull off the man's left boot, her jaw clenched. Peeling away his sock as well, she looked at the bottom of his bare foot where a mark on his sole identified him for her.

"A Storian Primary," she said, dropping his leg. "I thought as much."

"I heard they wore the Assassin's Mark on the left side of their neck," Ailyn said.

"Aye, they used to, but now they hide it so they appear no different than you or I," she said. "They've been doing it for a while now. We've known about it since your stepfather was attacked a few years ago."

At the mention of Vice-Counselor Jost, Ailyn frowned. "That bastard could have killed you, Shanee," he said.

"Not a chance. I felt him the moment we got on the elevator and I know you did too. He's one of O'Shay's hirelings no doubt," she stated. "That's the second time they've tried to do me in."

Guards suddenly appeared rushing toward them down the corridor.

"What happened here?" one of the men asked after introducing himself as the chief of security.

After relating to the security chief what had transpired, Shanee told him she'd brief the captain. "You might as well jettison him now. You can do a retinal scan but there's not a chance in a million of finding out who he is," she said.

"He called himself Franklin and he just signed on this trip," the chief said. "Kept to himself."

"Typical Storian professional," she allowed. "Get this prick out of here."

"Aye, aye, Ma'am. If I need any more information from you, Colonel, I'll get in touch."

"Whatever," she quipped then took Ailyn's arm as two guards picked up the dead man to take him to the morgue. "Let's go. I'm hungry," she said, and pulled him along with her.

"That's it?" he asked her. "That's all the response you're going to show? You killed a man, *ionúin*."

"What would you have me do, *ehemann*? Flutter my eyes and faint? Fall into your arms and sob?" She snorted. "Not gods-be-damned likely you'll ever see me do either. He struck, I counterattacked and he died. End of story."

"I would have killed him for you," he said.

"There was no need. I can fight my own battles."

When they reached the VIP dining hall, the captain had already been apprised of what had happened. He apologized profusely, made sure Ailyn had not been harmed and invited them to take a seat. The others at the table also voiced their concern.

"We are fine," Ailyn said, sensing the annoyance that was lurking just beneath the surface of his wife's barely civil disposition. "It's all over with."

"Not a very good welcome back to military life," the healer commented.

"Oh Colonel, your mother sent a message asking you to contact her first thing when you return to your quarters tonight," the captain said.

Shanee's head snapped up. "When was this?"

"She called while you were en route to the dining hall," Captain Bartlett replied. "I told her what had happened but assured her you were all right."

Glaring at the man, Shanee asked from where her mother was calling.

"She is staying in your quarters on Riezell," Bartlett reported.

Ailyn saw a muscle jump in his lady's cheek and knew she was a breath away from exploding with fury. Her hands were clenched into fists in her lap and her gray eyes were sparking fire, her lips pressed tightly together. He reached out to place his hand over hers. He felt her jump then snap her attention to him.

"I am here," was all he needed to say to calm her down.

Shanee let the tension drain from her rigid shoulders and she tried to smile although her lips would not obey the command. Ailyn's warm flesh on hers was a promise of more than just unity. He was letting her know he had her back.

The rest of the evening passed intolerably slowly for Shanee and she was thankful nearly all the questions and remarks were aimed at her husband and she was being all but ignored. His ordeal on R-9, his intriguing status as a Reaper, his tales of life on Theristes, held those at the table spellbound. She was keenly aware of his polite answers, his calm voice, even his laugh now and again but since he was sitting beside her, her attention would drop to his right leg as it bounced up and down, an unmistakable sign of his agitation.

Walking hand in hand back to the elevator later, they were quiet, each lost in his or her own thoughts.

"Was that as excruciatingly boring to you as it was to me?" she asked as they waited for the elevator doors to open.

"I've had worse times," he admitted, "but it's been awhile." The doors opened and he put a hand to the small of her back to usher her inside the empty cage. "I suppose I'll have to readjust myself to a social life."

"I don't have one so you need not worry on that account," she said as the doors closed. She frowned. "You aren't going to want to start a social life, are you?"

He shook his head. "Not high on my list of things to do to make up for twenty years of exile," he said. "I don't know that I will always be capable of playing nicely."

"Just the thought of having to return my mother's call irks the shit out of me," she snapped. "And to think that woman was given access to my quarters! There's no telling how much snooping she's done by now."

"I hope you don't keep a diary," he said.

"Of course not," she snapped. "That's a silly female thing to do."

"Far be it for you to do anything so impractical," he teased.

The elevator stopped and they walked out, were quiet until they reached her door.

"I'd rather take a beating with a *Dóigra* than return her call," she said.

"*Dóigra*?" he questioned.

She shrugged as the door shushed back on its pneumatic hinges. "An Amazeen weapon," she explained. "It has a star-shaped glass ball on the end used to burn flesh." She pointed to her own *Dóigra* that stood in one corner of her quarters.

"Ouch," he commented, having missed the wicked-looking thing before. It didn't look like anything he'd like to have applied to him.

"You should have brought your spear," she told him. "We could have crossed them on the wall."

The vid-com screen was pulsing a light pearly gray color—not intrusive but not something that could be overlooked either. It was a not-too-subtle reminder that a call had been generated and a reply was requested.

"Might as well get it over with," Shanee grumbled. "Vid-com on!"

The face of Queen Polemusa, the defense queen of Amazeen, appeared instantly on the screen. She wasted no time getting to the point. "You took your time getting back to me, Shanee. Were you hurt in the attack?"

"No, Mother," Shanee replied. "I'm sure the captain said as much to you."

"He's a man," the queen scoffed. "He can't be trusted." Her eyes narrowed. "Is that the Reaper with you?"

Ailyn had sat down in a chair, an ankle crossed over his knee. His elbows were on the chair arms, his fingers steepled as he stared at the vid-com screen. "I am Ailyn Harmattan," he said. "Your daughter's mate."

"A Reaper," the queen sneered. "A male warrior of supposedly incomparable abilities though not as good a fighter as an Amazeen."

"Try me sometime, sweeting," Ailyn drawled, his voice hard. "Any time you feel you want to get your ass put down, look me up." An evil smile pulled at his lips. "I'll be happy to oblige you."

Shanee's mouth dropped open and she turned to stare at her husband. No one dared speak to her mother in such a way and to have Ailyn do so put unbridled fear for his life in his mate's heart. "Ailyn!" she hissed in warning.

"Why are you disturbing Shanee?" Ailyn asked, ignoring his wife.

Polemusa's gray eyes widened. "How dare you allow him to speak to me in such a fashion, Shanee! Chastise that man and send him away so we can discuss our business."

"Any business you have with my woman, you have with me," Ailyn snapped. "State it and be gone. We've had a boring evening with boring, pretentious people and I'm getting a fucking migraine."

Sputtering with outrage, Polemusa cursed vehemently in her native Amazeen language. Her face had mottled with anger and her eyes were as hot as the fires of hell. "You despicable cur!" she insulted Ailyn.

"You meddlesome old hag," Ailyn threw right back at her.

"Bastard!"

"Bitch."

Shanee was so astonished all she could do was turn her head from vid-com to husband as though she were at an old-fashioned tennis match.

Another wild curse propelled Polemusa up and out of her chair. She doubled her fists and braced her weight on them as she leaned on the desk before her.

"I received word an attempt was made on your life three months or so ago and that you nearly died, Shanee. Since you had not bothered to inform me what had happened I came to Riezell to speak to you, to talk sense into you about this ridiculous job you have undertaken with the Guardians. I want you..."

"We don't give a Diabolusian rat's ass what you want," Ailyn interrupted her, his face as hard as flint, eyes as cold as ice. "Shanee is a grown woman—a *married* woman—and is no longer answerable to you or her tribe since you tossed her out for following the dictates of her conscience. If all you're doing is calling to complain, we don't care to hear it and now you can end the call."

"How dare you!" Polemusa shouted.

"Vid-com off!" Ailyn ordered and the screen went black. "Turn off for the evening."

Completely stunned by her husband's take-charge attitude, Shanee just stared at him. He was sitting in the same position, his eyes on her now instead of the vid-com screen, and his face was once again calm and relaxed.

"You've made an enemy of her, *ehemann*," she predicted.

A slow smile turned his face even more handsome. "Not at all. She'll want to meet me face-to-face to size me up. She knows I've put her on notice and she won't dare ignore me again. If I have to fight her, I will, but I'm warning you now, I will be the victor in the duel and when I put her down, it won't be easy and it won't be pretty, but she will know her place."

She had no doubt of that. Her Reaper had the strength of ten men, which meant he had at least that much strength against an Amazeen.

"You've been so calm up until now," she said, amazed and intrigued by what she perceived as a remarkable transition – no play on the word intended.

"There is an old Gaelachuan saying that there is always calm before the storm," he reminded her. "Well, little Amazeen, you're looking at a tornado in the making if your mother doesn't back off and leave you the hell alone."

"But you..."

"You, my precious wife, are not the only one whose persona changed the moment she stepped on this ship," he said. "Though there were many things you changed in me on Theristes, there was one I would never have anticipated." He uncrossed his legs and stood up, adjusting the buckle of his belt, hitching up his black leather uniform pants. He put his hands on his hips and gave her a solemn look. "This afternoon as I read all there was to be found about my supposed death, what happened to us at R-9, I came to understand that I have an obligation here. I am a Reaper. I now accept what I am and the gods help any man – *or woman* – who dares challenge me."

Chapter Nine

Shanee could not help but feel proud as she walked beside her husband through the hallowed, secretive halls of Command Central. Men stepped aside when they recognized that black uniform with its silver raven insignia and the Reaper triangle. Women actually trembled as he passed and many a door was hastily opened and shut.

"I believe you are scaring them, *ehemann*," she whispered to him.

The right side of Ailyn's mouth twitched upward in a quick grin. "That is my intention, *ionúin*."

She had trouble accepting the change in her man. He was no longer the calm, accepting male she had come to know on Theristes. Here was a warrior with whom to reckon and she literally trembled at the thought of what his presence here at Command Central was doing to the people. Though in private he was the same loving, gentle, compassionate and fiery lover, outside among the populace, his face was stony, his eyes hard and his bearing rigid.

Damn but I'm as wet as a schoolgirl, she thought, and knew he had intercepted that musing for he turned his head and looked down at her, one dark brow lifted.

"Oh yeah?" he growled.

"Oh yeah," she stated.

Miriam Quillan glanced up as they came into her office, looked down and then snapped her head back up, her mouth dropping open. She shot to her feet. "Milord!" she said, her face draining of color.

Before Shanee could gloat over the secretary's unease, Ailyn stepped forward.

"Miri, isn't it?" he asked, holding out a hand.

Miriam's head bobbed up and down and she slowly lowered her gaze to his outstretched hand. Timidly, she placed her hand in his.

"Miri?" Shanee questioned, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, dearling," he said, and lifted her hand to his lips, his gaze never leaving Miriam's.

Shanee wanted to scratch the other woman's eyes out and had to dig her fingernails into her palms to keep from throwing herself on Quillan and doing just that.

"Thank you for all you've done. It is greatly appreciated," Ailyn said, and released the secretary's hand.

"It was m-my honor, milord," Miriam replied. She cast Shanee a quick glance.

"No, she doesn't know but I will inform her later," the Reaper said softly.

"Know what?" Shanee demanded then blinked as full realization hit her. "You? You are the...?"

"Is General Strom ready to meet with us?" Ailyn interrupted his wife.

Shanee snapped her mouth shut and blushed, realizing she had been about to blurt out something that could cause untold ripples of trouble.

"Aye, milord. He..." Miriam began.

"Ailyn," he said. "My name is Ailyn and that is what my friends call me."

Miriam smiled. "Ailyn," she repeated. "I am honored to be considered a friend."

"Husband," Shanee barked. "Ailyn is my husband so don't you be getting any ideas, *Miri!*"

Miriam frowned. "You two are Joined?" she asked.

"Aye, darling," Ailyn replied. "Now would you let the general know we're here?"

As soon as Miriam informed General Strom of Ailyn and Shanee's arrival, he came hurrying out of his office, his face breaking into a wide grin. He thrust his hand toward Ailyn. "Welcome home, Commander," he said. "It's good to have you here!"

"Commander?" Shanee queried, her voice rife with shock.

Strom shook Ailyn's hand then turned to his Primary. "He was on the rolls all this time and if he'd been around for promotions, that rank is what he would have been given long before now. Hell, he might even be an admiral if things had been different." He swept an arm toward his office door. "Come on in and make yourselves comfortable." He glanced at Miriam. "Bring us a bottle of that Chrystallusian brandy the Burgon sent when I took over Command. We've finally got something to celebrate with it!"

Shanee took one look at her husband's impassive face and knew he had known what was awaiting him at Command Central. He politely held her chair for her as she seated herself then sat down beside her.

"I was infuriated by the assassination attempt on the *Midian*," Strom said as he walked around behind his desk and took his seat. "Any news at all on who the assailant was?"

Ailyn looked to his wife for her to answer the general's question.

"Retinal scan did not identify him but he was Storian," Shanee replied.

"If those Storian assassins would put even a third of their energy into helping instead of killing, Leveche wouldn't be having such a hard time rebuilding his homeland." He shook his head. "His father did so much damage and he let those bastards run wild, unchecked. Now I fear they are on O'Shay's payroll."

"Any word on Bakari?" Ailyn inquired.

"Last report I got he was on Iosrael." He shook his head. "Missed O'Shay by mere minutes, I heard."

"He'll catch him," Ailyn said.

"I've no doubt of that," Strom said.

Miriam brought in a black lacquered tray that held the expensive plum brandy and three snifters. She placed the tray on Strom's desk, removed the stopper on the bottle and poured small amounts of the fiery amber liquid into the snifters.

"Make sure we aren't interrupted," Strom ordered. "And if that pest comes by – he'll have heard by now the commander is here – tell him he'd best not come knocking on my door. As a matter of fact, just lock the door and take the rest of the day off."

Miriam smiled. "That might be best, Sir."

After she was gone, Shanee asked if the pest was Jost.

"The man has made such a gods-be-damned nuisance of himself I had to involve the arch-counselor," Strom said with disgust. "He managed to get himself censored by the Conclave but still he persists in annoying the hell out of me."

"I'll handle Jost," Ailyn said, a muscle flexing in his lean jaw. "Any news on his lady-wife?"

"She is failing more each day to hear the vice-counselor talk but my informants tell me though she has gotten progressively worse, she is not as close to dying as she or her husband would have us believe," Strom replied.

"With my appearance here on Riezell, Colonel Iphito's mission has been accomplished," Ailyn stated. "Have you a new assignment for her?"

Shanee threw her husband an irritated look. "I don't imagine that's any of your concern, *ehemann*," she snapped.

Ailyn didn't even glance at her. He was staring straight at Strom. "I am making it my business, Shanee," he said, and before she could say anything else, he told the general that he wanted to be partnered with the general's Primary.

"What?" Shanee gasped, she vaulted out of her chair. "How dare you ask for me to be..."

Turning his head to give her a calm look, Ailyn smiled. "Did you notice I said I wish to be partnered with you and not the other way around, *ionúin*?"

She snapped her mouth shut and narrowed her eyes into lethal slits before speaking. "I am a Primary Riezell Guardian, Commander. I..."

"Sit down and listen to my proposal to the general before getting your hackles up, Shanee."

"I will not! I..."

"He outranks you, Colonel," the general said. "I suggest you do as he ordered."

Hissing, Shanee slammed back into the chair and glared at her husband.

"I am not questioning your abilities," Ailyn said. "You are more than capable of taking care of yourself as you proved on the *Midian*. I am merely suggesting that you need someone at your back and since I would never allow another male to fill that position, I have every intention of doing so myself."

"I don't need a partner," Shanee snapped from between clenched teeth. "And even if I did, I'd ask for a female."

"Actually for the next assignment I have, it would be extremely helpful, Colonel, for there to be a female and a male on the team," Strom said, and almost flinched when the Amazeen's head snapped around and she gave him a killing look.

"He's influencing you," Shanee accused. "He's using his gods-be-damned sublims on you, General!"

Ailyn sighed. "No, I'm not."

There came a heavy pounding beyond the general's office door. It was muted for it was being delivered against the door to the outer office.

"Jost," the general grumbled. He reached over and flicked on the vid-com. He ordered the camera in the corridor accessed.

Ailyn was staring at the large vid-com screen that sat to one side of the general's office. As the image came up, Shanee heard a low growl coming from her husband's throat. When she glanced his way, she saw an expression on the Reaper's face that made the hair stand up on the back of her neck.

"Vice-Counselor Jost and your brother Felix," Storm reported softly.

Though there was no sound, it was obvious Jost was shouting. His face was red with anger as he pummeled the door with his fists. The young man beside him looked almost as angry as his stepfather. And then Jost kicked the door.

"That man is an idiot," Shanee commented.

"He hired the assassin on the *Midian*," Ailyn said, his fingers on the arms of the chair digging into the leather.

Strom looked away from the screen. "Are you sure?"

Ailyn nodded without speaking.

"Why would he do that?" Shanee asked. She had considered the vice-counselor to be nothing more than the nuisance Strom had labeled him.

The Reaper studied the irate man. "His mind is a quagmire of wickedness," Ailyn said quietly. "He wants his wife dead so he can gain access to her fortune. It wasn't your death he contracted for but mine."

"So the Storian wasn't after Shanee after all," Strom said.

"No, he was," Ailyn said. "I read it in his mind during the attack but he was being paid by Jost as well as whoever hired him for O'Shay. I just didn't know that until now."

"So what do we do?" Shanee asked. "Other than arrest Jost."

"Not just yet. We don't want to let him know we are aware of what he tried to do," Ailyn said. "As I said, I'll handle Jost." He swiveled his attention to the general. "Let him in."

Without a comment Strom got up out of the chair and walked to the door, opened it and went out into Miriam's office.

"What are you going to do?" Shanee asked her husband.

"Keep quiet and listen, *ionúin*," he answered, and then vanished before her eyes.

Shanee popped out of her chair like a jack-in-the-box, twisting her head this way and that trying to find her husband. Her heart was suddenly thudding in her chest for even though she'd seen Rory Quinn disappear on many occasions, she had not seen Ailyn do so.

Jost cursed Strom as he bulldozed his way past the general and headed straight for Strom's office with Felix Harmattan striding close behind him. He came up short when he saw the Amazeen facing him. "Where is he?" he demanded.

"Where is who?" Strom inquired.

"The Reaper!" Jost shouted. He too was looking about the room.

"Do you see him?" Storm asked.

Jost's jowls wiggled as he closed in on Shanee. "Where is he?" he demanded again. "Why didn't you bring him with...?"

It was then the door to Strom's office slammed shut, making everyone jump as all eyes went to the door only to find no one even close to the portal.

"Who the hell did that?" Jost snapped.

The chairs in which Ailyn and Shanee had been sitting suddenly lifted up from the floor and sailed across the room, governed by unseen hands. The two other chairs that sat before the desk soon joined the others.

Felix Harmattan stumbled back until his shoulders were pressed tightly to the wall. His eyes were wide, his mouth open and he appeared to be trembling.

Jost's florid face paled and he rushed to the door and tried to open it but it was sealed shut, and no matter how hard he turned and twisted the lock, it would not budge. He spun around, his fearful eyes scanning the room. "He's in here," he said. "I know he is!"

Strom calmly took his seat behind the desk as Shanee walked to his side. They faced the general's visitors with emotionless faces. "Why are you here, Vice-Counselor Jost?" Strom inquired.

"Show yourself, Reaper!" Jost shouted.

"I wouldn't call him that if I were you," Shanee said. "He doesn't like it."

To emphasize her words, one of the chairs levitated from the floor and became nothing more than kindling in the space of a breath. The debris fell to the floor.

Jost gasped and slid along the wall to get close to his stepson. "I meant no disrespect," he muttered.

Two chairs rapidly skidded from the wall to in front of Strom's desk.

"Sit down!"

The disembodied voice was harsh and threaded through with a savage growl that brooked no disobedience. Both Jost and Felix practically ran to the chairs across the room and sat down—Jost nearly tumbling from his, the chair tipping precariously before he managed to right it.

A faint smile hovered over Strom's face as he leaned back in the chair. "Would you like to sit down, Colonel?" he asked.

Shanee replied that she'd stand. She could sense her husband near though she could not see him.

"Please, Ailyn..." Jost began.

"It is Commander Harmattan," the Reaper said, and appeared. He was standing beside Shanee with his arms crossed, his stony glare directed at Jost. "You will never again address me by my given name. Is that understood?"

"Aye, Commander," the vice-counselor was quick to agree.

Felix was staring at his brother with several emotions seemly crossing his young face. There was fear mixed with awe in his dark eyes but his mouth was mulishly set, his cheeks dotted with color. "And what is it I am to call you?" he asked Ailyn.

Ailyn shifted his stare to the young man. "You were but an infant in swaddling when last I saw you," he said, his voice losing some of its animosity.

Felix's chin came up. "I'm a man now."

A hint of a smile tugged at Ailyn's mouth. "Well, you're on your way to becoming one at any rate."

"Mother is dying," Felix said. "She wants to see you before she..." He faltered. "You know."

"She wants one of my fledglings so she can live," Ailyn stated.

"By the gods, she doesn't!" Felix said with a gasp. "You are...you're a..."

"Reaper," Ailyn finished for him. "And aye, Felix, all she wants is what I can give her."

"How can you say that?" Felix questioned. "You are her son, her firstborn. She..."

"Hated me from the moment I was born and the only reason she's willing to see me now is to gain a parasite to cure her," Ailyn said.

Jost timidly raised his hand to gain the Reaper's notice. When those amber eyes flicked to him, the vice-counselor blanched for there was cruelty and vengeance in that penetrating stare. "Will you..." He swallowed before he could continue. "Will you give her a parasite, Commander?"

"You will be delighted to know that I won't."

"Ailyn!" Felix shouted, jumping to his feet. He did not hear his stepfather's sigh of apparent relief. "You have to. If you don't, she'll die!"

"Do you think she cared about me while I was interned at R-9, little brother?" Ailyn asked. "She didn't give a damn what they were doing to me."

"She didn't know," Felix denied.

"Oh but she did," Ailyn insisted. "It's all a matter of record."

Shanee exchanged a glance with Strom. There had been no mention in the files either of them had read on Ailyn that indicated Elspeth Harmattan knew her son had survived the crash of his father's ship the *Abroholos*.

"I don't believe you," Felix said.

"Vid-com on," Ailyn snapped and the screen powered up. He didn't bother looking toward the screen. "Access file EFB-ID 2648759515, password stinger."

A copy of an ID card flashed onto the screen. In the center of the card was the picture of a young woman identified as Elspeth Briza. The document bore the seal of the Aduaidh Alliance.

"Our mother worked for the Burgon before Ryden Bakari," Ailyn said. "I believe the correct term for what she was engaged in was called a honey pot."

"That's a forgery," Jost said. "It has to be. A honey pot was an antiquated euphemism for spying."

"Actually it was sexual entrapment to gain information," Strom corrected him.

"She married our father to gain access to information needed by the Alliance. According to the official Alliance records, it was her knowledge of the movements and mission of the *Abroholos* that gave her handlers what they needed to destroy the ship and everyone on board it," Ailyn said. "Access file #KGH-6197975652-A_05-14-2320."

Documentation of the information—signed by Elspeth Briza—given to the Alliance regarding Duke Harmattan's ship flashed across the screen which was split into two sections. The left section contained a vid-sequence of a flyover showing the destruction of the *Abroholos*.

"This can't be happening," Jost said, his face even paler than before. He buried his face in his hands. "This can't be happening. She can't be a spy for the Alliance."

Felix walked over to the vid-com screen and read what was written there, his face washed out by the silvery glow of the screen. When he was finished he turned to look at Ailyn. "Even if this is true, she couldn't have known what would happen to the *Abroholos*," he said. "A woman doesn't send her husband and her child to their deaths."

"Ours did," Ailyn said. "Access file ALH-6891234658-A_05-20-2320."

The final document also came up on a dual screen. On the right side was a vid-sequence of Ailyn having a parasite dropped onto his back. On the left side was a signed authorization giving the Alliance scientist Perse Cean permission to use Ailyn LeVey Harmattan in their experiments. The document bore the initials EBH—Elspeth Briza Harmattan.

"Since she was a valued member of the Alliance, they had to get her permission before they could torture me," Ailyn said in a flat voice. "She knew what was going on at R-9 but she gave that permission anyway."

Felix was staring wide-eyed at the vid-sequence as Ailyn began to Transition. He finally tore his attention from the horror taking place on the vid-com screen and staggered to his chair. He sat down, staring straight ahead of him, his lips parted.

"She knew where I was, Felix," Ailyn said, "but she didn't care. She also knew where I was taken when I left R-9. I can't prove it but I'd be willing to bet it was her finagling that got you assigned to the *Revenge* so you could discover me among the Reapers. Do you blame me now for not wanting to help her?"

"But she's your mother," Felix said, tears glistening in his eyes. He looked up at Ailyn. "She gave you life."

The sound that came from the Reaper might have passed for a laugh had not those in the room not been looking at his face. "She gave me life, all right, and she tried to take it. When that didn't work, she sentenced me to a hell you cannot even begin to imagine, little brother. I should let her have one of the hellions just so she'll know the agony I went through because of her."

"She's been a good mother to me," Felix said, but Ailyn could sense the lie his younger brother was telling. "Please, you have to help her."

"No I don't," Ailyn said, stressing each word, and then he vanished again.

"Ailyn!" Felix shouted.

"Leave him be," Shanee said. "He's suffered enough because of your mother. Let her pay for what she did to him."

Chapter Ten

He was waiting for her out in the corridor as she knew he would be. She said nothing as he held out his hand and together they walked toward the elevator. His hand was steady in hers, his flesh warmer than usual. They waited silently for the elevator to arrive. When it came, she saw his eyes search the cage before he led her inside and knew from now on that would be the case whenever she was with him.

"Two down and one to go," he said as the elevator doors closed behind them.

"That was a cakewalk compared to what we're going to face with my mother," she told him.

"We'll see," he said. His gaze was on the panel showing the floors they were descending.

"Were those documents real?" she asked.

He nodded. "Only too real."

"We didn't know about any of that," she said.

"You didn't know where to look," he said. "When we were first brought to Theristes, Tariq asked Bakari for all Alliance data that had been removed before the shutdown of the Reaper program and the Burgon complied. Tariq told me how to access that data. He thought I should know. He said he believed it would help me make my decision of whether or not to accept what it is I've become."

"And it did," she said.

"And it did," he repeated.

"Strom should be given the data," she said.

"He will be," her husband agreed.

The elevator settled and they got off to take the tram to the hanger where Shanee's runabout was docked. It would take them to her quarters outside the city.

Her runabout was a sleek midnight blue Fiach with a dark purple stripe from nose to elevated tail. The ship stood out among the other runabouts.

"Sweet," Ailyn said as they neared the gleaming machine.

"If you play your cards right, *ehemann*," she said, "I might let you take the controls once we're out of traffic."

He snorted. "Don't trust me in traffic with it, huh?"

"It's been awhile since you've flown, big boy, and things have changed considerably," she chastised him.

"Think it, *ionúin*, and I can fly it with the best of them," he reminded her.

She stopped—putting a hand out to halt him—and gave him a challenging look. “You believe that?”

“I *know* that, little Amazeen,” he replied confidently.

Her grin was all he needed.

Twenty minutes later he was sailing her precious little craft into the hanger at the complex where she was quartered. After settling the expensive Gearmánach vessel into its docking harness, he shut down the engine and turned to give her a wink. “How’d I do?” he taunted.

“Ask me that after you’ve survived my mother,” she mumbled.

“Oh,” he said. “Are those Class 10s in your quarters?”

“Aye.”

“Are they activated?”

“Not yet. Why?”

“Do me a favor and don’t activate them while I’m around,” he asked.

Shanee frowned. “All right but why? We may need them on our missions, *ehemann*.”

“On missions, perhaps, but not where I am living and sleeping, Shanee,” he said. “I hate cybots.”

“Not a problem,” she said.

Queen Polemusa was pacing the floor as the door to Shanee’s quarters opened. She whirled around to face the man who came in right behind her daughter. “*Ich fordere Sie, Kanaille heraus!*” she threw at him. “*Außenseite im Hof!*”

“Mother, really,” Shanee said, wincing at her mother’s challenge to Ailyn to meet her in the courtyard and calling him a cur. “This is...”

“*Wenn Sie bereit sind, Ihren Esel unten sich setzen zu lassen, holen Sie ihn an, meckern,*” Ailyn said in perfect Amazeen.

Shanee gasped. Her husband had nastily said, “If you are ready to have your ass put down, bring it on, bitch.”

Hissing like a cornered viper, Polemusa shoved past her daughter and her daughter’s mate and went outside.

“You can’t be serious!” Shanee said then narrowed her eyes. “When did you learn Amazeen?”

“I learned a lot of things while you were playing with Jules’ life,” he told her. “And I’m not going to back down to her challenge, *ionúin*.” He spun around on his heel and headed for the courtyard.

“The gods help me,” Shanee snapped, throwing her hands into the air. She went after them.

Neither Polemusa nor Ailyn were armed. The defense queen was wearing a short, white toga-like garment that accentuated the lack of a right breast. She had kicked off her sandals and was standing on the grass, hands on her shapely hips.

"Come on, Reaper," she threw at him.

Ailyn swept his hand down his body and the black silk shirt and black leather pants were replaced by his beloved breechclout. His boots had disappeared as well.

Shanee saw her mother's face alter slightly and knew she was sizing up the man facing her—not from a warrioress's viewpoint but from that of a woman. She almost smiled as her mother licked her lips until Ailyn spoke.

"Like what you see?" he taunted.

The Amazeen queen yowled with fury. Like an enraged bull, she lowered her head and charged. Her fingers had arched into claws. As soon as she reached her opponent, he took hold of her and flipped her easily over his hip, setting her down almost gently on the grass before stepping out of her reach.

Scrambling to her feet, Polemusa charged again, but this time Ailyn grabbed her arms and fell backward, placing a bare foot against her midriff to cartwheel her over his head. She landed on her back with the air knocked out of her body.

Shanee grinned when her husband put his palms flat on the ground behind him and did a back handspring that arched his back then vaulted him to his feet. She could have hooted with laughter when he put his hands on his hips—not even breathing hard—while her mother lay gasping for breath.

"Need some help getting up, old woman?" he inquired.

Polemusa struggled to her feet and stood there bent over, hands to her knees. She lifted her head and gave the Reaper a hateful look before launching herself at him again.

Ailyn grinned as he lowered his hands and braced for her hit. When she collided with him, he wrapped his arms around her then swept her legs out from under her with his foot. She skidded downward between his legs and landed on the ground with him atop her—pinning her arms and clamping his legs tightly along hers.

"Bastard!" Polemusa screeched. She tried to move but he had her well in hand and she could not break free of his hold.

"Do you concede?" he asked.

"Hell no!" she spat at him, and tried to head-butt him in the chin but he twisted his head to the side and she merely clipped his shoulder.

"I've won, wench," he told her. "Be a gracious loser and concede." When he saw what she was about to do, he turned his head away again and her spittle went flying over his shoulder.

"Mother!" Shanee said. "That was beneath you."

"Aye, I agree it was childish and silly but your mother hates to lose, *ionúin*," he said.

"*Sie sind ein eingebildeter bastard,*" Polumesa said, calling him a conceited bastard.

"*Und Sie sind sehr schön, wenn Sie verärgert sind,*" he said, telling her she was very beautiful when she was angry.

"Aye, well, you really haven't seen me truly angry, Reaper," Polumesa snapped. "Now let me up."

Ailyn smiled. "Say please and I will."

The defense queen's eyes flared wide. "I do not kowtow to any man!" she growled.

"I am not just any man, baby," he told her and his grin disappeared. "You do not show respect for a warrior's ability either, do you? I guess there is no honor among the Amazeen when one of you has been bested in a fair fight."

He didn't wait for her to answer but let go of her and rolled away, getting to his feet and turning his back on her to let her know she posed no threat to him.

Shanee held her breath, curious to know how her mother would respond to that challenge.

"Don't you walk away from me, boy!" Polumesa shouted.

Ailyn swiveled his head around. "Then show me the same deference you would a female who defeated you and I'll treat you as the equal I believe you to be."

Put in that light, Polumesa had no other option. She squared her shoulders. "I acknowledge you won that fight but I won't be as easy on you the next time around."

Shanee expected Ailyn to snort at that statement but he merely nodded. He waved a hand and his Reaper uniform settled in place over his muscular body.

"Walk with me, Mother," he said. "You and I need to have a little talk."

Polumesa gritted her teeth. "Don't call me Mother," she snapped as she dusted off the back of her toga.

"Would you prefer I called you Mama or perhaps Mom?"

A hiss was his answer as the defense queen came toward him. "I prefer 'Your Majesty' but 'Mother' will suffice."

Shanee came forward to join them but Ailyn shook his head. "This is just between the two of us, *ionúin*. Wait here."

"Already he is subjugating you," Polumesa stated, giving her daughter an I-told-you-so look. "That is what comes from legally Joining with a man."

"Would you rather she had Joined with a woman?" Ailyn inquired.

"At least a woman would not treat her as property," his mother-in-law insulted him.

"Unlike Amazeen women who treat their males like equals?" he countered.

Polumesa snarled at that statement but fell into step beside him. "Point taken," she admitted.

Once they were out of Shanee's hearing range, Ailyn spoke quietly to her mother.

"I love your daughter with all my heart," he said. "I would not have asked her to marry me if I did not."

"You can have the milk without buying the cow," she reminded him.

"Aye, but I gave her my name so I might defend and protect her. She..."

"She doesn't need your protection!" Polemusa declared.

"Perhaps not, but it is there if the need should ever arise," he said quietly. "As it did on the *Midian*. Had I not pulled her assailant off her, he might have done her harm."

Polemusa shrugged but did not say she agreed with his assumption.

"I know you worry about her since she is no longer under the aegis of her tribe. You should feel some relief that there will be someone at her back when she goes on her missions from now on."

The defense queen stopped in mid stride and put a hand to his arm to halt him as well. "You will be working with her?"

"I want her safe, Polemusa," he said. "I will be with her from now on or she won't be working for the Guardians."

"You think you can stop her?" Polemusa sneered.

"I know damned well I can," he replied. "Do you doubt it?"

She stared into his eyes for a long time—taking his measure, giving him her most intimidating glower but he did not so much as blink much less lower his gaze to that threatening glare.

"You promise you will keep her from harm?"

"I do."

"That you will treat her as she should be treated—with honor and with respect?" She narrowed her eyes. "You will be faithful to her?"

"I am a Reaper," he reminded her. "I will have but one love in my lifetime. I have given that love to your daughter. I will keep myself only unto her. There will never be another for me."

"You will give her children?"

"I will give her as many sons as she wants."

"What of daughters?" she ground out.

Ailyn shook his head. "That I cannot do. My parasite will not allow it."

Pain drifted over Polemusa's face. "It is every Amazeen's dream to have a daughter to follow in her footsteps. Shanee is my only child. I want a granddaughter to..." She shrugged as though hating to admit what she was about to say. "To spoil."

"Are there no female children in Amazeen who need a mother?" he asked. "Are there no little girls who should not be with the mothers they do have?"

"You would accept such a child?"

"Every child needs a mother's love. When that love is withheld, the child rarely grows up to be a happy, well-adjusted adult."

"You sound as though you speak from experience," she said.

"I do."

Polemusa had not come to this meeting with Ailyn Harmattan without knowing all there was to be gleaned about the man her daughter had married. She knew he had not lived a happy childhood and that his own mother had ignored him his entire life. She suspected there was even more pain lurking in his past in relation to his mother that she didn't know about and made a mental note to discover what that pain was.

"Shanee cannot come to Amazeen to find such a needy child," Polemusa said.

"Do you not think she would trust you to find her a little one who will need what we can give her?" he asked.

"We?"

"We," he said.

Polemusa's grip was still on his arm and she seemed to be unaware that she was caressing the hard muscle of his biceps until he looked down pointedly at her hand. She jerked her hand away and ran the palm down the skirt of her toga. "Forgive me, son," she said.

Without missing a beat, Ailyn reached for her hand and laid it atop his forearm as he drew her along with him, covering her hand with his free hand. "There is nothing to forgive," he said as though no harsh words had ever passed between them. "I swear to you that I will do all I can to make Shanee happy. I will never raise a hand to her and I will strive to never raise my voice either. I will give her a good life and I will be there with her for as long as the gods allow."

Polemusa relaxed as they walked. "That is all a mother can ask for her child," she said gently.

"It pleases me to know you love Shanee," he said.

"As it pleases me that a warrior such as you loves her," the defense queen replied.

* * * * *

Shanee was pacing in front of her quarters, glaring at those who had been peeking out their windows at the spectacle playing itself out in the courtyard. She knew none of her neighbors—didn't care to—and was irritated that they were spying on her personal business. When she realized her mother and husband were coming back from their short walk, she was stunned to see her mother's hand on Ailyn's arm and that the defense queen was smiling.

"You have done well, daughter," Polemusa said. "This one is a keeper."

Ailyn lifted his mother-in-law's hand and kissed the back of it. "*Mai ist der Wind immer an Ihrer Rückseite, Mutter,*" he said softly then let go of her hand.

"*Mai ist der Wind immer an Ihrer Rückseite, mein Sohn,*" Polemusa replied.

"Now I'll leave you two lovely ladies to discuss me behind my back," he said with a grin, and thrust his hands into the pockets of his leather pants.

After he was inside her quarters, Shanee put her hands on her hips and glared at her mother. "Since when have you *ever* wished a man that blessing, Mother?"

Her mother cocked a shoulder. "It seemed the polite thing to do since he wished the Wind at my back."

Shanee's eyes narrowed. "Since when have you ever extended *politeness* to a man? You wouldn't even say please when he bid you do so!"

"He was lying atop me, daughter," Polemusa said. "I wasn't about to ask him to please get his well-honed and wonderfully heavy body off me." She smiled. "I was enjoying him far too much."

Shanee rolled her eyes. "That is a terrible thing to say about your son-in-law," she snapped.

"Don't tell me you find his weight and his muscles—not to mention that hard cock I could feel pressing against my thigh—not to your liking, Shanee," her mother said.

"Mother!" Shanee gasped, her face beet red.

"Go," Polemusa said with a laugh. "Make use of that steely shaft with my blessing. I must return to Amazeen lest your aunt incite an insurrection against me."

* * * * *

When his lady-wife came inside, Ailyn was reclining on the settee in a pair of black silk pants that hugged his long legs like a second skin. His chest and feet were bare, one knee crooked as he read an old-fashioned book he had brought with him from Theristes.

"Did you know Terra was once inhabited by dragons?" he asked.

She came over to him and took the book out of his hands. "No, I did not know that," she said, putting the book aside.

"They were called pterodactyls. They looked a bit like..."

She gripped his wrists, pressed them down to either side of his head and then put her right knee on the settee. She swung her left leg over him and stretched out along his hard length.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What I was ordered to do by my mother," she said, writhing her lower body against his.

"And what was it she ordered you to do?" he asked, his voice gruff.

"To make use of your steely shaft."

His dark eyebrows shot up. "She said that?"

"In those exact words," she answered. She lowered her head and nibbled on his chin. "With her blessing."

"Huh," he commented.

Shanee pushed up on her knees as she straddled him and pushed the elastic top of his pants down until she could free his cock—already hot and already hard. She caressed him with one hand while she ran her other under his heavy balls.

"You're not playing fair," he said, and with one wave of his hand, her uniform was gone.

"You are a naughty boy," she said, grinning.

"I was a preoccupied boy. I was reading about pterodactyls and it was very interesting," he said.

She removed her hand from his cock and reached for his wrist, bringing his hand to her breast. "I got your pterodactyl right here, Lord Scholar, and it is interesting."

He molded his palm over her breast, squeezed her lightly and plucked at the nipple. "No, milady. This isn't a pterodactyl. This is definitely a triceratops. Wanna know how I know?"

"Aye," she said, licking her lips. "I am aching to know."

"Because it's horny and it's feisty," he said, and he moved both his hands to her hips.

He lifted her and sat her down on his erection.

"Oh baby," she said. "Now that's a steely shaft."

He was a rock-hard missile enveloped in velvet as he slid in and out of her, easily lifting her hips and lowering her as though she weighed no more than a feather. The smell of his juices mingling with hers added to her need. His cock was so deliciously long and wonderfully thick in circumference that it completely filled her and began to satisfy the ache that pulsed between her legs.

"You can be a bit rougher, you know," she said, flinging her long white hair behind her.

"Like this?" he asked, slamming into her with force.

"Even harder, Lord Scholar," she taunted.

He thrust upward with his hips as he pulled her down onto his cock with enough strength that her eyes flew wide.

"Aye!" she said. "Like that!"

She was riding his hard shaft, her breasts bouncing as his fingers dug into her hips. Her head was thrown back, her eyes closed, her hands wrapped around his forearms. She could feel the sweat glistening on her face and feel it beading along the creases where their bodies met. Lowering her head and opening her eyes, she stared into his and quivered at the raw need sparking red flares in his amber eyes.

"You are my woman," he said through clenched teeth.

"I am," she agreed as the first faint ripple of delight wriggled through her sheath.

He felt her body tensing around him and knew at the exact moment her climax began because it grabbed him with such force, her muscles contracting around him with such intent it almost hurt.

Tremors of delight shot through her as the quickening suddenly came fast and furious, followed speedily by his own climax that had him pounding upward against her with enough force to make her gasp. Grunting with each thrust, he finally stilled as her last quiver drained him and he relaxed.

Allowing her to slide down his spent body, he held her against him until they were both ready to move apart, each still breathing heavily.

"I've got to round us up a meal," she said as she climbed off him.

"I've got reading to do."

She reached over and took up his book then handed it to him. "Dinner in twenty," she said.

He nodded as he opened the book to the place where he'd left off. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her as she headed for the food prep area of their quarters and smiled. It felt good, it felt right and it was beginning to feel like the home he'd never had.

Chapter Eleven

Ailyn awoke in the middle of the night and lay there for a moment trying to figure out what had torn him from his sleep. Since leaving Theristes behind, he had been sleeping like a baby at night with Shanee curled in front of him, his arm around her. Now he lay on his back staring up at the ceiling and feeling his heart racing.

He listened but heard no sound that might have disturbed him. The quarters were locked down for the night—he'd made sure of it before coming to bed—so he knew no one could have entered without setting off the alarm. Shanee was lying on her side with her hands tucked beneath her pillow and the steady rise and fall of her chest told him she was fast asleep.

He folded the covers back and sat up gingerly so he wouldn't disturb his lady. As he started to swing his legs from the mattress, he got the first whiff of a tainted, acrid smell that made the hair on his arms stir. He frowned, loathe to put his feet to the floor.

"Ailyn, what is that stink?" Shanee said, turning over to face him. "My eyes are burning."

The smell was intensifying and the sharp, musky odor was suddenly so overpowering it started a violent headache in Ailyn. He tried to place the smell—knowing he'd encountered it before—for it was settling on him like a wet blanket.

"Ailyn?" his lady questioned and started to fling aside her covers.

"No!" he yelled at her and vaulted from the bed. The origin of the stench had finally come to him and he was out of the sleeping chamber like a shot. "*Stay here!*"

The lining of Shanee's nose was beginning to burn fiercely and her eyes to water. The smell was so powerful she could barely draw breath. Ignoring his order, she tossed aside the covers and stood up, padding around the bed in her bare feet.

"Ailyn? What is it? Is something on fire?" she asked.

There was a faint blue glow in the living area and she could hear Ailyn bumping into the furniture and cursing. Just as she reached the doorway of their bedchamber, the lights in the living area came on.

"*Shanee, get back!*" her husband shouted and she saw him sailing through the air toward her.

In slow motion she saw him land in front of her, skidding across the carpet with the three-foot-long creature whipping in his hand. She stared in horror at the broad triangular head, the slender body striped green and molten silver, the tubular two-inch sharp fangs that were buried in Ailyn's forearm. She watched a glowing blue ooze drip from the wound as the viper's vertical pupils shifted to her.

"Get back," Ailyn warned. He was shuddering as he managed to grasp the snake's head with his other hand and twist it from its body, leaving the ghastly fangs still buried in his flesh. Tossing the rest of the evil thing across the room, he struggled to get to his knees but he couldn't. Neon blue streaks of venom splattered against the wall and ran down it where the headless body hit, the death throes of the creature spraying the deadly toxic in flowing arcs.

"Ailyn!" Shanee screamed, finally galvanized into action when she saw the foam at her husband's lips. She reached for him but stopped as his glazed eyes speared her.

"Get...back," he whispered and collapsed, convulsing violently.

Shanee knew there was nothing she could do for him. "Vid-com!" she yelled, and when the screen pulsed into life, she shouted for a medivac team. "Hurry and be careful. My Reaper's been bitten by a ghoret!" She knew that one drop of the viper's venom could cause serious problems for a humanoid if not outright kill. She glanced at the two cybots that were standing against the wall and started to activate them.

A loud knock on her door startled Shanee. "That was quick," she said as she jumped over Ailyn's prone body, hurrying to let the medivac team in. She punched in the deactivation code for the alarm system then yanked the door open.

"You got here quick..." she started to say a second before a thick, oily mist hit her squarely in the face. She choked on the vapor and staggered back, already beginning to feel the cloying hand of unconsciousness reaching up for her.

* * * * *

Ailyn was delirious for over a week, strapped down to a table on his belly as he writhed in agony. Locked in excruciating pain as the venom attacked his nervous system and his blood boiled in his veins, the Reaper's flesh was speckled with pockets of pustules that formed then broke open on his body. His body temperature was acutely high. His throat was parched, his gasps ragged as he tried to draw air into his superheated lungs. Though his revenant worm was striving to produce its own toxin to combat the ghoret venom, Ailyn was lost in a hellish world from which he feared he'd never escape.

He fought the double-braided titanium-hafnium shackles that kept him unable to move and cried out as fresh anguish stung his skin while burning pus ran from the enflamed areas of his body. The stinking excretions pooled under his helpless body to eat at his belly and chest.

"Please," he begged, but though he knew he was not alone in his fiery prison, no one came to help him. Not one drop of water was given to ease his dry mouth. Not one milligram of tenses was administered to stop the pain of withdrawal and no Sustenance was provided to hold at bay the Transition that threatened to erupt at any moment. When it came, he nearly went mad with the inability of his body to change as it should, his limbs held forcibly in place so he was forced to writhe in unrelenting torment as his sinews tried to stretch, his bones to elongate, his organs to transform. All

that changed without ungodly torture was his face, hands and feet and even those hurt far more in Transition than they should.

Another four days passed in a haze of nearly unbearable pain. As slow as he'd been to Transition, he was that quick in reverting back, whimpering with the change that came so rapidly he had no time to adjust.

"It's safe now to harvest," he heard someone say.

He barely felt the scalpel cut into his flesh, drag down his back over his kidney but he did feel the tearing, brutal hurt that came as his parasites were pulled out of his body in clumps.

"They're not dead," he croaked. "Leave them be."

The revenant worm queen buckled and ran beneath his skin under his belly to hide to keep from being extracted but She was in no danger. It was the little ones, the fledglings, that were wanted, and when She realized that, She quickly healed his wound and continued to fight the ghoret toxin while gearing up to reproduce more spores inside him.

In a fog of agony, he saw the nestlings being dropped into beakers and placed on a shelf across the room in which he lay. His wavering vision saw faceless people moving about doing things he could not fathom and began to realize they weren't people after all but cybots that were completely without features.

How long he lay pleading for some kind of assistance he did not know. Gradually his pain began to subside, his elevated temperature to cool, his involuntary spasms ceasing. He became aware of conversation somewhere in the room and though he tried to lift his head, to turn his face toward the sound, he was too weak, too drained to do so.

All he really wanted to do was die.

* * * * *

"We know damned well who took him and why," General Strom told Shanee. "We just don't know *where* the hell they took him."

Sitting beside her mother, Shanee's eyes were swollen and she was far too pale but her facial expression was hard as flint. "When I get my hands on that bitch, I'll rip her heart out!" she declared.

Arch-Counselor Sebastian Euphrates nodded from the vid-com screen. "And it would be well within your right to do so, Colonel."

"Do we know how Jost bought it?" Strom inquired.

"According to the forensics team, Jost was poisoned," the arch-counselor replied. "It was a slow-acting nephrotoxin that would have caused an excruciating death."

"And still no sign of the younger son?" King Gabriel Leveche inquired from the other side of Shanee.

"It's like they all three—Harmattan, his mother and brother—fell off the face of the planet," Strom reported. "I've got all my Guardians involved—pulled them off every other case—but there hasn't been any intel at all."

"They were waiting for me to call the medivac team," Shanee said. "They sprayed me with the pairilis mist then took Ailyn. If only I'd not listened to him about activating the 'bots. They would have prevented all this."

"They'd have found another way to get to Ailyn, Shanee," Leveche told her.

"The mere thought of them transporting a ghoret into my daughter's quarters absolutely boggles the mind," Polemusa said. "She could have been killed. A single bite from one of those creatures has enough venom to kill twenty men or more."

A soft rap came on the general's door and he cursed. "Damn it, Miriam, I asked not to be disturbed!" he yelled even as the portal opened.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but..." Miriam began then stepped aside as a man politely pushed past her.

"I told her it would be all right." He patted Miriam on the shoulder. "Thanks, love."

Polemusa Iphito sat straight up in her chair and drew in a quick, stunned breath. Her hand fluttered near her chest and when her daughter gave her an annoyed look, she didn't notice.

"Can I get anyone something to drink?" Miriam asked. She too was staring at the man who had entered the general's office.

"No, Miri. We're fine," Strom answered for everyone.

"Shanee, I am so sorry to hear about your husband," the newcomer said, and he came to hunker down in front of Shanee, reaching out to take her hands in his. "Tell me what I can do."

"Find him," Shanee said, her eyes tearing up again much to her irritation. She swiped angrily at the telltale moisture.

"That is my intent," came the reply.

Ryden Bakari—the man who had once been Burgon of Aduaidh—got to his feet and turned to face Strom. "I came as soon as I heard and I've got Quinn with me." He gave Gabriel Leveche a grin. "How's it going, Gabe?"

"Fair to middling. I take it you've found him?" Leveche asked. He reached out to grasp the other man's wrist in the warrior way.

"Does the queen pop out fledglings?" Bakari quipped.

"Where?" Strom asked.

"Where do you think?" the former Burgon queried.

"The last place we'd think to look," Leveche said, grinning.

"Where?" Shanee asked.

"R-9," Bakari and Leveche said at the same time.

"Let's go," Shanee said, getting to her feet.

"I know you're anxious to get him back," Bakari said, "but he's pretty heavily guarded."

"Why?" Polemusa asked. "We thought it was his mother who took him."

"It is," Bakari stated.

"How did you find him, Burgon?" the arch-counselor asked from the vid-com.

Bakari nodded to the arch-counselor. "How are you, Sebastian?"

"Quite well, Ry."

"Although we dismantled the Reaper labs on R-9, the facility was still being used as a medical facility up until about four months ago. I had them keep a minimum-security staff on hand via a few cybots. The monitoring system was shut down to only a few rooms where entry into the facility is made. When we received an activation alarm from rooms that were not being vid-sequenced it sent up a red flag. I was informed right away. There was no doubt in my mind who had infiltrated the facility and what they were doing."

"Why didn't you just let us know?" Shanee demanded.

"Because in order to get into the facility without detection, it is going to take someone like Quinn," Bakari told her. "With the Maze the *Scaan* have developed, he can get in, shut down the alarms and the Storian Web Harmattan-Jost and her son have no doubt booted up, and then we can transport Quinn and Ailyn out of there."

"She'll have taken what she wants by now," Shanee said, "and have undergone Transition."

"Doubtful," Leveche said. "A ghoret bite leaves a Reaper pretty well incapacitated for at least a week, Shanee. They may have started taking the fledglings but they won't be able to use them until they know for sure the parasite doesn't have even one drop of venom in it. If it does, it would kill her the moment it is dropped into her body."

"She's a dead woman anyway," Shanee vowed.

"You said fledglings as in plural," Miriam spoke up. "I thought it was just the mother who wanted a parasite."

"It might have started out that way," Bakari agreed, "but I think it's progressed beyond that now."

"She's figured out she can sell them on the black market," Leveche said, his jaw flexing. "That's a lot of money and there will be people who will line up to shell it out to live virtually forever."

"We were afraid that would happen," the arch-counselor put in.

"Those fledglings must be destroyed," Bakari said. "If even one of them falls into the wrong hands, you'll have the beginnings of disaster."

"Do I understand that there is someone on R-9 who knows how to harvest the fledglings?" General Strom inquired. "Whoever that is, I want him."

"Aye," Bakari said. "Perse Cean and two of her Ceannus are once again on R-9."

Shanee gasped. "Oh god, no!" she said.

"Don't worry, Shanee," the ex-Burgon said. "Cean and her assistants won't ever leave that planet. I swear they won't."

"But he was so scared of her," Shanee said.

"And with good reason," Bakari said.

"Are you sure it's Cean?" Leveche asked.

"Aye, I'm sure," Bakari snapped. "I've seen the vid-seqs coming from there and I'd recognize that evil bitch anywhere. She is as ugly as stepped-in dog shit." His eyes narrowed. "And by the way, she's mine. I'll take her out myself."

"But you'll leave Elspeth Jost to me," Shanee told him.

"If she's Transitioned, you won't be a match for her, daughter," Polemusa put in. Her eyes had not left Ryden Bakari.

The ex-Burgon actually blushed at the look the defense queen was sending his way. "She's right, Shanee. Even at her advanced age, with a hellion growing inside her, she'll be a very powerful foe."

Shanee met Bakari's gaze. "I'll be ready for her, Burgon. She will pay for hurting my man."

Bakari nodded slowly. "I see. Do you think your husband will approve of what you are intending?"

Shanee lifted her chin. "It is my right to protect him as it is his right to protect me. I love Ailyn Harmattan and I have no desire for him to ever be alone again. I have to do this."

"Do what?" Polemusa asked. Her eyebrows were drawn together. "What is it you are thinking of doing, daughter?"

"She wants to become a Reaper," Leveche said quietly. He'd read it in her mind an hour earlier but had not mentioned it.

"No!" Polemusa hissed. "Burgon, you cannot allow that!"

"It is my decision, Mother, not yours or his," Shanee said. "He understands."

"As do I, Shanee," Leveche said. "But think carefully for once done, it cannot be undone."

Polemusa rushed to Bakari and grabbed his arm in a fierce grip. "Please talk her out of this. Please!" she asked, shocking everyone in the room with her use of the word. "I do not want my only child to go through such a thing!"

"Milady," Bakari said. "Shanee won't be diminished by it. She will be enhanced. She is not the first Amazeen to embrace this way of life nor will she be the last, I imagine. As she said, it is her decision."

"Do you fear she will be more of a warrior than you once the deed is done?" Leveche asked quietly.

"No, of course not," Polemusa said. "I love my child and I would not see her hurt." She turned to Shanee. "Did I not return as soon as you told me what had happened to your man? Does that not say I have great affection for you, Shanee?"

"Aye, it does, Mother," Shanee said, "and I am grateful you came back. I needed you then and I need you now. Try to understand. I love Ailyn and I will be the one to put down the bitch who is responsible for all the evil things in his life."

"I wish to the gods I'd known his mother had been a spy for the Alliance. I could have warned him," Bakari said, "but I never viewed those vid-seqs. I didn't want to know any more about what had happened at R-9 than I already knew. For that, I am sorry."

"It wasn't your fault, Burgon," Polemusa assured him. "How could anyone know a mother would setup her own son to be killed?"

"She would have been taken into custody had she not vanished before we could arrest her. Jost too since we knew it was he who contracted for Ailyn's assassination," Strom said. "Someone saved us the trouble with him."

"The wife," the arch-counselor stated.

"I'm not so sure," Leveche said. "From all indications, the stepson had no love for Jost. He could have done it."

"O'Shay wasn't the only one contracting for Shanee's demise. Someone else whose identity I haven't been able to discover also put hits out on her," Bakari said.

"Still no word on where O'Shay has gone to ground?" Leveche asked.

"No, but I'll catch up with the bastard," Bakari stated.

"So when do we leave to get my husband back?" Shanee asked. She was still standing, her hands clenched into fists at her side.

"As soon as I have my other men sealing off the corridors into and out of R-9 airspace," Bakari said. "Neither old lady Harmattan-Jost or Cean is going to escape the noose."

"Who are you stationing around the planet?" Strom asked.

"Gabe's brother Raoul Breva and the *Sangunar* for one," Bakari answered, "plus seven others loaned to us by Fleet Command." He grinned. "I just may let him keep the title and I'll retire."

"You have the *Sekkeen* or did you loan it out to the new Burgon?" Polemusa asked.

"Oh I'm letting him play with it a while," Bakari said. "I took the gargantuan, the *Raptor*, when Morrison kicked the bucket. Spoils of war and all that."

"We weren't at war, Ry," Leveche reminded him.

"Bastard ordered the hit on my palace that killed my family," Bakari snapped. "What was his is now mine! The Coalition didn't seem to have a problem with it. If they did, tough shit. The *Raptor* is now an Alliance ship and with a full complement of weapons." He gave Leveche a puzzled look. "By the way, when did Raoul begin captaining the *Sangunar*?"

"Since matters at home keep me in Vespertine," Leveche grumbled. "I came here in my new Fiach. That is one bitchin' machine."

"Named?" Bakari prodded.

"*Meu Brinquedo Pequeno*," the infamous Lord Savidos replied with a grin. "It means..."

"I know what it means," Bakari stated with a roll of his eyes. "Idiot."

"What does it mean?" Polemusa inquired.

"My little toy," Bakari grumbled. "What can I say? The man's an imbecile."

"I would like to accompany you on this mission," Polemusa said, giving Bakari a heated look.

"Ah, sure," Bakari said, blushing again. He glanced at Strom. "May I have a few of your Riezell Guardians just in case?"

"You have the Primary," Shanee said. "You don't need any more Guardians."

Bakari smiled. "All right." He looked at Leveche. "You coming, Lord Savidos?"

Leveche snorted. "Think you can keep me out of it?"

For the next twenty minutes the mission was discussed in detail then those gathered started leaving. The arch-counselor wished them luck and promised any assistance they might need in accomplishing their goals. Strom asked Polemusa to accompany him to Pass and ID so she could be given a temporary assignment to Command Central. Shanee asked to be given half an hour so she could get her Class 10s and bring them to the *Raptor*. Only Bakari and Leveche were left in the general's office as Miriam tidied up.

"You flew close to R-9, didn't you?" Leveche asked quietly. He glanced at Miriam to see if she'd heard him.

"Miri works for me," Bakari said, giving the secretary a wink. "You can talk openly in front of her."

If that news surprised Leveche, he didn't let on. "Did you fly close to R-9?" he repeated.

"Aye," Bakari admitted.

"Could you sense him?"

The ex-Burgon sighed. "No, Gabe, I couldn't."

"That could mean they are keeping him weak."

"That's all I'm hoping it means," Bakari replied.

"I pray Ailyn's still alive," Leveche said. He headed for the door then realized Bakari wasn't behind him. He saw his friend in quiet conversation with Miriam. "You coming, Ry?" he asked.

Bakari was staring into Miriam's eyes. "Not yet," he said softly.

Leveche saw the woman's cheeks heat red before she turned away. He cocked a brow at Bakari who was striding—no, Leveche corrected himself—who was strutting toward him.

Bakari winked at the infamous Lord Savidos then continued on to the corridor.

"Your grace?" Miriam called out to Leveche.

"Aye, wench?"

"Keep him safe," she asked.

Leveche nodded. "You have my word on it," he replied, knowing she didn't mean Ailyn Harmattan.

Chapter Twelve

"Hello, Ailyn."

Though he had not seen his mother for over twenty years, he knew who the woman was who came to stand beside the table upon which he lay strapped. He would have known her by the haughty glint in her cold brown eyes but it was the triumphant glare in that chilling gaze that held him spellbound, unable to look away.

"How does it feel to be home?" she asked.

He had recognized the cell into which he'd been placed. After all, he'd spent close to twenty lonely, miserable years there.

"You are looking well, Mother," he said, his voice weak.

"No thanks to you," she replied.

"It isn't one of my fledglings squirming around inside you?" he asked.

Elsbeth Harmattan-Jost ignored his question and instead reached out to gently tug on the light blanket that covered him from waist to foot. "Are you warm enough?" she asked.

If anything, he was too warm. The venom was still lurking in his body but he was no longer ill from the effects. His head hurt brutally but that was because he hadn't been given adequate dosages of either tenerse or Sustenance. He knew they wanted to keep him weak and as biddable as possible.

"Where's Jost?" he inquired.

"Dead as a doornail and rotting if there is any justice in the world," she told him. "Your brother took care of the good vice-counselor before we were forced to vacate Riezell." Her gaze narrowed into a pinpoint dart of anger. "Thanks to you."

"Did Felix know you were an Alliance spy?"

His mother made a rude sound with her lips. "No and that is something else I have you to thank for, Ailyn," she snapped. "Is there no end to the trouble you are capable of causing?"

He watched her pace across the room, her spine as rigidly straight as he had remembered it from the few occasions he'd spent time with her as a child. Her shoulders were back, her head high, her posture that of an important woman who expected her every wish to be fulfilled. She was lovely with wavy brown hair tastefully streaked with gray, her tresses immaculately coiffed. Though she was in her late fifties, she looked ten years younger now that her illness had been eradicated by the hellion within her. Since he had not seen her during her battle with the disease, he did not know the haggard wrinkles that had made her look far older than her years had

smoothed out. All he saw was a youthful glow to her skin with almost wrinkle-free features.

"Do you find me attractive, Ailyn?" she asked.

"I said you looked well," he replied.

She smiled to reveal white, even teeth of which she had always been proud. "I was told not to expect the revenant worm to do anything other than cure me of my infirmity but She granted me a rejuvenation that was a very welcome surprise."

"Then it was worth the pain of the Transference and Transition," he said softly.

"Aye, it was," she said dreamily. "It was a price I would gladly pay again for these stunning results." She ran a hand down her shapely figure. "You have no idea how terribly I suffered with that sickness."

"So what now, Mother?" he asked. "Has Felix been given a parasite too?"

"Of course not!" she stated. "I would never allow that and he does not want it anyway."

"Just the money."

She gave him a look that answered any question he might have had. Her full lips spread into a taunting grin. "We stand to make a fortune off those fledglings of yours," she said. "Of course after you sign over your inheritance to Felix, we'll have even more capital with which to work. We will be leaving here within the next day or so to accompany Dr. Cean to her homeworld."

Ailyn's black blood ran cold. "Cean is here?"

"Well of course she is," his mother replied with a careless wave of her hand. "Who do you think performed the Transference? Do you think I would have allowed just anyone to cut open my flesh, Ailyn? I wanted the best and she was sent to me."

Despite being secured tightly to the stainless steel table, Ailyn shuddered. He had not considered Cean returning to the scene of her crimes and knowing she was nearby—her cold, scaly hands where they could touch him—sent tremors of fear down his spine.

His mother did not notice the pallor that had overtaken his face. She began telling him that Cean and she would be setting up shop on Cean's homeworld of Chiaroscuro where they would begin a full-scale hatchery.

"Hatchery?" he repeated, the word sending ice through his veins.

"We plan on creating what Perse calls *balgairs*," his mother said.

"Reaper rogues," he said. The thought of hundreds—if not thousands—of Reapers being created by Cean and her assistants made him sick.

"Don't worry, Ailyn. We have plans that reach far past this part of the megaverse," she said, her eyes glowing with reddish sparks. "We plan to take our *balgairs* to Terra where we will become rulers of our kingdom."

That was worse yet, he thought, staring with horror at her. The innocents of Terra had no idea what would be heading their way and they had no way to protect themselves against the threat. His mother and Cean had to be stopped at any cost but at the moment he was in no position to help humankind.

"Where do I fit into your plans?" he asked.

She looked surprised at his question. "You?" she questioned. "What possible purpose could you serve after we've harvested as many fledglings as we need to begin?" She shook her head. "No, Ailyn. You will remain here."

"Alone," he said, unable to keep the hurt and hopelessness from his voice.

"Well, yes," she answered. "Though we will leave you sufficient tenses and Sustenance to last until you are rescued."

He doubted that since they'd given him precious little of either since this whole ordeal had begun but made no comment to her words.

"I believe there will be one more harvesting later today," she said, and came back to stand at the table. "After that, I'm afraid we won't be seeing one another again."

"*C'est la vie*," he said in Francach.

She bent over him and placed a dry-as-dust kiss on his temple. "Cean will be in to see you in a moment. She tells me you were her favorite Reaper."

Ailyn's heart squeezed painfully in his chest and his scrotum contracted with that news. He remembered all too well those ice-cold hands of the scientist on him and knowing she would touch him again and—as it had been before—he could do nothing about it—brought bile to his throat.

He watched her leave the room and shut the heavy portal behind her. There were no feelings left for the woman who had given him life. Those feelings had long ago died. He doubted there ever had been any for him on her part. But still, she was his mother. He ached for the love and the relationship that should have been yet never would be. When the door opened again and his living, walking nightmare entered, he had to force himself not to scream.

* * * * *

"She is in with him now," Elspeth told her younger son. "Are the beakers being loaded on the ship?"

"Did you not give me that job to do, Mother?" Felix inquired.

Elspeth frowned at him. "Have you prepared your brother's Sustenance?"

Felix smiled. "There are two weeks' worth of it stored in the main lab's refrigeration unit. If Command Central takes longer than that to find him, he'll Transition and stay that way until they do find him." He shrugged. "Of course without tenses he might well be a raving beast by the time they think to look here for him."

"Aye, well, that's better than him dying, I suppose," she said absently.

"What do you care?" Felix asked.

She gave him a withering look. "I may not like him but he is still of my flesh and blood, Felix Andres. Do not be insolent."

"Forgive me, Mother," he said. "I meant no disrespect."

"I know," she said. "You are a good son."

"Better than Ailyn ever was," he said.

She nodded. "Too true."

"Will he sign the inheritance over to me?" Felix asked. "Will I be duke of Kentsington now?"

"I imagine when Cean is finished with him, your brother will have signed whatever she puts before him," she answered. "And aye, you will be the new duke when he abdicates."

* * * * *

Perse Cean's black-as-pitch pupils seemed larger than he remembered as she stood staring down at him. Two of her larger cybot constructs had accompanied her into his cell and they had unshackled him and turned him over so he lay spread-eagled on the cold steel table, the thin blanket removed so he lay naked before the scientist.

"You have always been such a magnificent specimen, Ailyn," Cean said. Her large teardrop-shaped head tilted to one side as she observed him. "I believe your muscle tone is even better now than it was when I left you."

He could not stop the whimper from escaping as she laid her warty hand upon his chest. The sharp scales on her slender palm disgusted him as it dragged over his flesh, the barbs on the scales sending shivers down his sides.

"It is at times such as these that I miss having a sheath into which I could place your staff." She slid her hand over his abdomen—leaving shallow bloody furrows where her scales passed—to wrap her fingers around his cock. "It is unfortunate Acklard didn't come with us this trip. He will miss out on this."

Ailyn knew it would do him no good to beg her. He knew she expected it, wanted it, *craved* it, so he clamped his lips shut and tried not to look at her sharply pointed face, her slit of a mouth, the dagger-like teeth that hid within the red pulp of her mouth.

"You know what I want, Ailyn," she said, and her prickly fingers began moving upon his flesh.

He dug his fingernails brutally into his palms until black blood began to ooze from the half-moon cuts. His body was tense—as taut as a bowstring—as she maneuvered his flesh, and not for the first time. Many times he had endured her loathsome touch as she milked him of his sperm, sperm she needed to help make her new generation of *balgairs*.

"I had to leave all those delightful little gametes behind when I fled the facility," she cooed to him as she increased the rhythm of her grip. "Now I can get them back and take them with me where they will be lovingly cared for until they are used on Chiaroscuro."

Tears were creeping from the corners of his eyes and easing down his temples as he tried to keep his treacherous body from reacting to her masturbation.

One of her cybots was standing across from her, a beaker in its metal hand as Cean manipulated Ailyn's cock. Its faceless head was lowered over him, its long, thick digits curled around the beaker.

"Release your sperm, Ailyn," Cean said in her soft, alien voice that sounded like one long velvet hiss. "Let me have your progeny."

Though he tried so hard he was trembling with the force of it, he could not keep his body from betraying him. Sweat broke out all over him, his shaft leapt and spurted then he cried out, mortally ashamed—as he always was—by the evil thing she did to him. He could feel his blood mixing with the cum slick from his cock where her barbed flesh had burred into him.

"That's my sweet little Reaper," she said as the cybot stepped back with the beaker. She took her hand away. "You've known a human cunt, haven't you, my dear one?"

His hands were clenched as tight as he could squeeze them and blood pooled around them. He had turned his face away from her but she reached out and took his chin, forcing his eyes back to hers.

"Now, unless you wish for me to turn the 'bot loose on you, you will sign the papers your mother wants you to." She increased her hold on his chin. "Do you understand me, Ailyn?"

Mortal fear raged through him at what she had trained her 'bots to do to him. "Aye," he said.

"Unclench your hands," she said. When he didn't immediately obey, she leaned over him, her dark, pupilless eyes merciless. "Unclench your hands, Ailyn!"

He slowly relaxed his grip and the paper and pen appeared out of thin air. His right hand was unshackled and the paper held for him to scrawl his signature across the bottom.

"That's a good boy. You know better than to clench your hands," Cean said. "Now give me the password."

Ailyn almost smiled. He could give her the true password but he had no intention of doing that. He gave her the one that would ensure the account could never be accessed. By using it, the bankers on *an Éilvéiseach* would seal the account forever. "Portcullis," he whispered.

Cean smiled. "Good. That's all we need from you, Ailyn. Now, let me tell you what you will need to know to survive until you are found..."

Afterward, she had left him there with the lights out to help alleviate the massive headache throbbing at his temples—mercifully taking the lumbering cybots with her. The room was cold but his body was shot with fever still. Thankfully she had ordered the 'bots to unshackle him and now he lay on the table in a fetal position, shivering.

* * * * *

Rory Quinn was just as cocky as ever as he greeted Shanee on the bridge of the *Raptor*. The *Scaan* known far and wide as the Phantom had once been her lover but was married now to the Healer Kendall Byrne.

"Pirated any ships lately, Quinn?" Leveche asked as he took the reformed thief's hand.

"Just yours," Quinn joked. "Oops. Guess I wasn't supposed to tell you that." His smile slipped away. "Did Ryden tell you those bitches on R-9 managed to pilfer Storian technology?"

"Aye, he told me," Leveche snarled. "That's how they got the ghoret into Shanee's quarters. Makes me mad as hell that one of my people helped Cean and when I find out who it was, I'll drain him dry."

"Makes my gods-be-damned blood boil," Quinn commented. "If they ever got their hands on the Maze, I'd be a freaking basket case!"

Shanee shook her head. Though the Phantom was a very handsome man, he could not hold a candle to her Ailyn. He was more boyish and filled with irreverent humor, though in a crisis, he was all warrior.

"How've you been, Shanee?" he asked.

"I have been great, Phantom," she replied.

"We'll get him back for you. I promise."

She nodded. "Just do your job. That's all I can ask." She glanced at Ryden Bakari and saw her mother dogging his every step. "I think an intervention is needed."

"Burgon?"

Bakari turned to see Shanee coming toward him as she hailed him. "Aye?"

"May I speak privately with you?" she asked. "In your office?"

Polemusa shot her daughter an annoyed look. "The Burgon and I were having a discussion, Shanee."

"It will have to wait, darling," Bakari told the defense queen. He reached out and took Shanee's upper arm in a tight grip and began walking at a fast clip. "This way, Colonel."

Leveche fell into step behind them. When Shanee glanced back at him, he smiled. "I think I know what you want."

"I'm sure you do," she said.

Once they were in Bakari's office, the two men turned to face Shanee.

"It will have to come from me, not Ryden," Leveche said. "He hasn't had his hellion that long and his nestlings aren't mature enough for what you'll need."

"And his fledgling will be more powerful than the one now inside Ailyn's mother since Gabe's parasite is a direct descendant from Morrigunia."

"Well, from Morrigunia's hand at any rate," Gabe corrected. "The gods only know whose parasite I was given. The reason mine is more potent is because it will be third generation. Since Ry's fledgling came from me, it would be fourth generation. The closer the nestling is to the original, the more powerful it is at Transference. Ailyn's is second generation from Tariq so his mother's is third. Do you follow?"

"Aye," Shanee said. She swallowed. "Can we do it now?"

"We'll have to go down to the containment cell because as soon as the hellion is inside you, you'll begin to change," Leveche said. "Ry can escort you and I'll stop off in the lab to have my blood drawn for your initial intake and for the subsequent first Sustenance you'll need."

Though her stomach rebelled at the mention of consuming blood, Shanee didn't let on. She knew Bakari—at least—knew how she must feel.

"You are sure now that this is what you want?" Leveche asked. "Ailyn is going to be royally pissed."

"Were you pissed when your lady became a Reaper?" she asked.

"It was the only way my lady could lead a normal life," Leveche replied. "She would have been left without sight or hearing had I not intervened. Ardor is a warriorress and she would not have wanted to live as a helpless invalid." He shrugged. "And she has never truly regretted what I was forced to do."

"There is that other thing though," Bakari said, his cheeks blazing with color.

"She doesn't need to know that," Leveche snapped. "It's a moot point."

"Know what?" Shanee asked.

The two men glared at one another. It was Bakari who explained. "His lady was unconscious when they did the Transference so she didn't have any of his blood before the procedure was done."

"Is this really necessary?" Leveche growled.

"She should know," the ex-Burgon said.

Leveche threw his arms into the air. "I don't want to hear this. I'm going to the lab."

Shanee watched the Storian stomp out of the office then gave Bakari her attention. "He's angry."

"He'll get over it," Bakari said. "He just learned the hard way what happens when you don't prime the pump—so to speak—when a man Transfers a parasite to a woman." He spiked his hand through his thick salt-and-pepper hair. "As he says it's a

moot point since you are already mated to Ailyn but I firmly believe you should know everything you can about what you're about to undergo."

She didn't like the sound of that. "Go on."

"Well, without having partaken of Gabe's blood before she had her first Transition, when she drank it afterwards Ardor was a bit...well, she sort of..." His cheeks went darker. "She kind of..."

"What?" Shanee asked, irritated.

"She all but raped him because she was so aroused," he stated.

Shanee's eyes widened. "Are you saying I'll throw myself on Gabriel Leveche and...?"

"No!" Bakari was quick to say. "And he wouldn't allow it anyway. You'll never be able to mate with anyone other than Ailyn after the Transference but I just thought you should be told..."

She lifted her arms and crossed them several times in front of her to get him to shut up. "I don't want to hear any more," she declared. "Tell me afterward else I'll not have the courage to do this, Burgon!" She headed for the door. "The con cell is on Five, isn't it?"

Bakari acknowledged that it was and started after her.

* * * * *

It was just the three of them in the containment cell. Leveche had ordered a crewman to transport a rolling stainless steel table into the cell.

When Leveche joined them—unable to look into Shanee's eyes now that she knew what had happened between him and his lady after Ardor's Transference—he carried a small tray upon which set a large beaker of his black blood along with a small glass of the viscous liquid as well as an empty beaker. He handed the glass to Shanee and the tray to Bakari.

"What does it taste like?" she asked as she stared down into the tarry substance. She saw him smile and her eyes narrowed. "Why are you grinning, Leveche?"

"Everyone asks that," he replied. "It can't be described, wench. It is what it is."

She snorted and before another thought could deter her, she lifted the glass and drank. The expression on her face said it all.

"You get used to it," Bakari said. He set the tray down on the floor but took up the empty beaker.

"By the gods I hope so," she said as she lowered the glass.

Leveche went over to the table and hopped up, turned and stretched out on his belly. He reached behind him to tug his black silk shirt from his leather pants. "Is your blade sharp, Ry?" he asked.

"Does a Diabolusian warthog stink?" Bakari quipped. He withdrew his obsidian dagger from the sheath at his thigh and went over to Leveche. "Three-inch cut, right?"

"Just above the kidney," Leveche agreed.

"I remember," he said. "Here, Shanee. Hold the beaker for me."

She came to stand across from the ex-Burgon. When he made the incision on Leveche's back then dug his fingers into the cut, she felt her knees grow weak—especially when she heard Leveche gasp.

"For the love of the gods, Bakari, stop wiggling your fingers inside me! The queen will direct one to you," Leveche growled. "Hold your gods-be-damned hand still! You're killing me here!"

"Wimp," Bakari said.

"I'll wimp you when I get up," Leveche warned.

The blood Shanee had ingested was doing strange things to her body. It hadn't tasted all that bad but it had been thick and much hotter than she would have imagined. As she stared down at the black blood trickling from Leveche's wound, she was beginning to feel aroused and that really concerned her. But as soon as Bakari pulled the fledgling from the Reaper's body, all thought of sex evaporated.

It was the ugliest thing she'd ever seen in her life that Bakari dropped into the beaker she was holding. Instinctively she thrust the beaker away from her as far as her arm would extend and just stared in horror at the monstrosity that was whipping and flopping like a beached eel within the glass beaker.

The abomination was covered with horny scales that were the color of green pus. On its back was a ridge of sharp hooked red spines. Beady red eyes that were elliptical in shape like a viper's bored through the glass at her as it flexed the tip of its forked tail.

"Accept Me, warrior. Protect Me and I will protect you!"

"It spoke to me!" Shanee said, her eyes like saucers. She couldn't tear her gaze from the creature's forked tongue inside the triangular head. She saw row after row of sharp little teeth inside the maw of its red mouth.

"Everyone has that reaction too," Leveche said, and she glanced at him in time to see the wound on his back close as though by magic.

"Take Me unto you, warrior, and I will make you invincible!"

"I don't know if I can do this," Shanee said and—to her mortal shame—felt a trickle of urine escape between her legs.

Some kind of milky substance was dripping from the eel-like thing's mouth and where it fell in the beaker, it sizzled.

"Is that acid?" she questioned.

"Aye," Leveche said. "You won't feel it inside you." He got up from the table and tucked his shirt back in. "Up you go."

Shanee took a step back at that command. She was staring at the hideous thing in the beaker. "It looks like a tomato hornworm," she complained.

"My thought exactly," Bakari said, taking the beaker from her. He looked at Leveche. "Are you going to do it or do you want me to?"

"I've been through this before," Leveche said. "Once I make the incision you can leave. I'll see to her."

"I can do it," Bakari said though his voice said he'd just as soon not.

"Go," Leveche commanded. "But don't go far. You and I are going to have a little talk about your wimp insult, Burgon."

Bakari grinned. "Yeah, yeah, yeah." He reached out to pat Shanee's shoulder. "It'll be all right, dearling." He patted the table.

Shanee wiped a hand over her mouth. She was sweating as she cocked a hip onto the table then slid her butt along the steel surface that was still warm from Leveche's high body temp.

"Lie down on your tummy," Bakari instructed, "and pull up your tunic for us or do you want me to?"

"I'll do it," she said. She lay down on her side then shifted to her stomach. She had to reach both hands behind her to pull the heavy wool material up to bare the small of her back.

"It will sting," Leveche said. His own black volcanic glass dagger was now in his hand. "When the parasite is dropped on you, it will feel cold and slimy. Try not to move. It will sense the cut and shoot down into it under the first layer of skin. As soon as it burrows to your kidney, it will attach itself there."

"And that will hurt like hell," Bakari said, only to frown when Leveche flung him an annoyed look.

With her hands to either side of her head, her fists clenched, she felt the initial sting as Leveche made his incision. She heard him tell Bakari to drop the parasite.

The slimy weight plopped on her and she felt it crawling. Goose bumps popped out all over her.

"Go, Ry!" Leveche snapped, and she heard the con cell door close.

The parasite wriggled on her back.

"Here we go," Leveche said in a soft voice.

She knew it was going to hurt. She'd seen the vid-seqs of Transferences on the Reapers on R-9. She understood that the creature would sink its sharp fangs into her organ and begin sucking her blood. She thought she knew how bad that pain would be but nothing could have prepared her for the gnawing, tearing misery that came as soon as she felt the creature slither down into her body.

Leveche quickly sheathed his blade and scooped her up in his strong arms. He carried her across the cell to the opposite wall and slid down to the floor with her, his legs wrapped securely around hers.

The Transition began as the pain increased tenfold within her back. She felt her body temperature soar to an unbelievable height that drenched her in sweat as the clothing on her body ripped apart as her flesh expanded. Fur wriggled out of her flesh, her bones popped then cracked then compressed. Her sinews stretched, her muscles cramped then re-formed themselves. Her nose thrust out, her jaws snapped and fangs erupted where teeth had once sat. Her eyes seemed to expand, her vision sharpen and her sense of smell elevate, her hearing intensify. She could barely move within the firm restraint of Leveche's arms and legs but she could feel her organs rearranging inside her, making hideous squishing sounds as they altered. Her fingernails became claws and she dug them into his forearms. She struck out at him with her back legs that were now paws and heard him grunt as her claws raked him but he kept a firm grip on her, not allowing her to move all that much and that—in itself—was agonizing.

"It will never hurt you this bad again, Shanee," she heard him say, but that meant nothing right then for she was in such pain she would have begged for death had she been capable of human speech.

Leveche was surprised when her shape-shifting ended and he found himself holding a very beautiful cinnamon red wolf with thick hair tipped in black—around fifty pounds of very mad, very strong lupine.

"Easy, sweeting," he said in its ear. "I've got you."

Shanee threw her head back and howled, her fangs bared but she made no move to snap at the vulnerable neck that was within inches of her mouth. She struggled against him and made a keening sound of misery.

"I know, baby. I know," he whispered.

When it was over and her body began to return to its human form, Leveche released her and she scrambled away from him to press into the corner of the cell, hiding her nakedness from him as best she could, her long hair covering her like a living blanket.

Leveche looked away from her just as Ryden Bakari came in with a blanket. He walked to her, leaned over and covered her with it.

"I've brought the tenerse," Bakari said. "And I am having the duplicator fashion a Reaper uniform for her. One of the yeomen will bring it to her."

"Shit, I'd forgotten all about that," Leveche said. His own black silk shirt was drenched with the combined sweat from her body and his own. He pushed up from the floor. "Will you give her the tenerse?"

"Sure."

The ex-Burgon drew a vac-syringe from his pocket then hunkered down by Shanee. "I must give you this, darling," he said in a gentle voice.

Shanee was trembling and made no sound as he swept her hair aside and placed the needle of the vac-syringe to her neck. She barely flinched as the fiery payload spread into her carotid artery. She shuddered once then laid her head on her knees, the blanket tight around her.

Because she had withdrawn, they left her there alone to come to terms with what had happened. They knew when she was ready she would come to them.

Chapter Thirteen

Polemusa had been too nervous to just sit still while her only child was becoming a creature whose very existence made the defense queen uneasy. There had been times in the history of the Amazeen when the tribes had tried – unsuccessfully – to incorporate a male Reaper into their bloodline. That time was still spoken of in hushed whispers for it had not been one of Amazeen’s finest hours. Because she could not allow herself to dwell on what was happening to Shanee, Polemusa had volunteered to pilot the *Raptor* toward R-9. She was expertly maneuvering the massive Class 9 Star Destroyer through asteroid fields like a hot knife through butter. Such things kept her mind occupied and her thoughts away from Deck Five. She had already outdistanced the three Delta Division Sub Cruisers that had been assigned by Fleet Command to aid the mission.

“We received a message that Captain Brevia along with three other Star Cruisers have reached R-9, your grace,” the com officer informed Leveche as he and Bakari took the bridge.

“Open a channel to the *Sangunar*, Lieutenant,” Leveche ordered.

The happy face of Raoul Brevia appeared on the vid-com. “How goes it, *chanto*?” he asked his half brother.

“Slowly but surely,” Leveche replied. “Are you in position?”

“Aye, and we’re cloaked and waiting for you,” Brevia reported. “And that’s the new cloaking device just in case you were worried.”

“I knew you’d handle it,” Leveche said. “Have you done any recon at all?”

“We know there are two ships on planet. One is a Diamhair LRC and the other a short-range sub cruiser with a Riezell registry. We are reading six life forms—four female and two male—and three ‘bot heat signatures.” He frowned. “One life form is very weak.”

Leveche and Bakari exchanged a look.

“Keep us informed, *chanto*,” Leveche said. “We’ll be there in less than an hour at the rate our pilot is pushing this baby.”

“Make sure no one leaves that planet before we arrive,” Bakari commanded.

“Will do, Burgon,” Raoul acknowledged then his handsome face vanished from the vid-com screen.

“You’re going to have to take back the Burgonship from Ben-Alkazar,” Leveche said. “Authority becomes you.”

“Aye, well it’s sat on my shoulders for so long, I don’t know how to act without it,” Bakari replied. “I...”

Colonel Shanee Iphito took that moment to come onto the bridge and every eye snapped to her tall, lithe frame. Before her Transition from human to Reaper she had been a beautiful, alluring woman. Now, she was extraordinarily stunning with skin that was perfectly flawless and dark gray eyes that seemed to pulsate with sensuality. Her white hair had changed to an unusual silvery shade that was breathtakingly lovely. She had about her an allure that every man—Reaper and humanoid alike—felt to the very pit of his soul.

"She shifts into a red wolf," Leveche told Bakari, "and I thought that was extraordinary but now..." He shook his head. "Ailyn is going to have his hands full with this one."

Rory Quinn was staring at his ex-lover as though she were a banquet that had been placed before him to devour. He had to shake himself to remember that he was a married man and that he dearly loved his lady.

Striding forward in the Reaper uniform that hugged her shapely body as though she'd been poured into the black silk and black leather, Shanee seemed totally oblivious to the commotion she had created on the *Raptor's* bridge. She walked up to Leveche and stood there with her hands on her hips.

"Thank you, Lord Gabriel, for your help. It was greatly appreciated," she said, and every male there felt his groin tense at the husky tone of her voice.

"It was my honor, Lady Shanee," Leveche replied in the time-honored greeting of one Reaper to another.

"I have programmed my 'bots to take out those of the Ceannus," she said. "Unless there is any reason you can think of for us to keep them intact."

"None that I know of," Leveche said. "You might instruct your constructs not to destroy the mem-chips just to be on the safe side."

"I already have," she said then switched her gaze to the vid-com. "I would like to see the planet."

Bakari ordered R-9 brought up.

The planet was covered in a red haze that gave evidence of the desert sands that continuously swept over the barren sandstone rocks. Dust storms were a hazard on R-9 and one of the reasons it had been chosen by the Alliance as a penal colony in the beginning.

"I've a stronghold on the other side of the planet," Leveche told her. "It's sealed but it can be reopened if need be."

"Are there provisions there?" she asked. "Water?"

"Everything you might need," he said. "Would you like to make use of it while Ailyn is recouping?"

She looked away from the vid-screen. "I would."

"Consider it yours for as long as you need it then," he said. "I'll make sure there are additional provisions—Sustenance and tenerse—transported in. There are two fully fueled runabouts still there if you need them."

"Once again, your help is appreciated, Lord Gabriel," she said.

"I would not like to be in Elspeth Harmattan's shoes," Quinn said softly to Polemusa. "She's going to make mincemeat out of that old hag."

"It is her right to do so," Polemusa replied. She was staring at her daughter, unnerved by the power, the authority and the strength Shanee had in spades. She wasn't so sure she liked seeing her only child in such a way.

Bakari put a hand on Shanee's shoulder. "Gabe and I need to go over some things with you before we reach R-9. Is now a good time?"

Shanee agreed that it was and the three of them left the bridge.

Once in the *Raptor's* conference room, the three Reapers sat down at the long oval table and Leveche leaned forward, his fingers threaded, elbows on the polished oak top.

"You heard the hellion speak to you and you heard Her promise. Listen to Her. She will not lead you astray."

"You are younger and in better condition than your opponent," Bakari added. "She also has the disadvantage of having been near death. The parasite will be working overly hard to vanquish all the poisons and diseased cells in her body so it will not be up to strength."

"You are also a warrioress—bred and trained," Leveche reminded her. "Though at one time she might have been a warrioress as well, many years have slipped under that bridge and I seriously doubt she's stayed in shape or kept up on the advances in fighting. You should defeat her easily."

"But as Gabe said, listen to your hellion. It will not allow you to do anything foolish, believe me," Bakari commented.

"Have you ever witnessed Ailyn fashioning clothing?" Leveche asked.

"Rearranging molecules?" she countered.

Leveche nodded. "Aye. You will be able to do it too but it takes a great deal of energy for such things. Don't do it unless you have the time to recharge that energy. It can weaken you at the wrong time. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"While you are engaging her, she might shift into animal form," Leveche told her. "Let her but don't be tempted to do the same in order to duel with her. That will have taken a lot of energy and it will have weakened her. Maintain your human shape. Understood?"

"Aye."

"You can't kill her when she's in lupine form but you can break her back, her neck and disable her to the point that she will be forced to change back to human form. As soon as she does, take the killing blow," Leveche said.

"Which is?"

"Take her head," Bakari said. "That's the only way you'll be sure to kill her. Her head must be separated from her body and the juvenile queen growing in her burned to a crisp. Otherwise, she can rejuvenate."

"The head has to come off and the body—especially the parasite—must be flash fried," Leveche stressed. He reached into his pants pocket and took out a phospho gun and laid it on the table. "This is an X-54 Magnum DC and it has the most takedown power of any weapon available from Fleet Command. Its range is fifteen feet with a pulse discharge of eight hundred amps to get your opponent's attention. A sustained direct discharge of two thousand amps to break the initial resistance of the skin and cause instantaneous unconsciousness takes roughly five seconds. If you are dealing with a human, that is lethal but with a Reaper, it will only put her down long enough for you to take the killing blow."

"With this," Bakari said, and slid an obsidian dagger beside the phospho gun.

"After you've taken her head, hike the amps up on the gun to the SDD range again and incinerate the body. That'll take about ten to twenty seconds. Watch for the parasite. It will try to scramble away and hide," Leveche warned.

The vid-com chimed and Bakari answered. "Aye?"

"Breva just informed us the LRC on Riezell-Nine is powering up. Looks like they're getting ready to skip," Quinn reported. He grinned. "Queen Polemusa wanted me to inform you that you'd best get back up to the bridge. We may need to activate the Maze as soon as we're in range so I can shut down that ship."

"Damn," Bakari barked. "All right. We're on our way."

"And FYI," Quinn said, "that LRC has been programmed for *an Éilvéiseach*."

"They're going after the money in Ailyn's inheritance account," Shanee said, her eyes blazing.

No one on the bridge said it but the implication was on each of their minds. If his mother and brother were headed for *an Éilvéiseach*, they had somehow extracted both a signature and the password from Ailyn. It did not bear thinking on for too long how that had been accomplished.

* * * * *

He knew he was alone. His Reaper senses told him as much. He had come out of Transition in a remarkably short span of time and that concerned him but not enough to worry about right then. His mother and the others were on the ship and they were leaving him behind and he had to find the Sustenance and tensesse Cean had told him would be there.

Weakly he rolled over and managed to pull himself up by leaning heavily against the slick titanium walls. He was naked and defenseless, without the energy to form clothing on his trembling body. It was hard to walk for his vision was wavering, the

floor undulating beneath him like rolling waves. The motion made him sick to his stomach and increased the headache that threatened to make his temples explode. He didn't think the visual disturbance was a residual effect of the ghoret toxin but he didn't know for sure.

With his shoulder sliding along the wall, he went out into the corridor and tried to regulate his bearings to what he remembered of R-9 when he and the others had been set free. He had wandered about the facility, unable to believe the size of it since his world had been relegated to his small cell for all those years. He was so thirsty his tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth and trembling so violently from withdrawal it was hard to think.

Propped against a doorway, he tried to locate in his mind where the main lab was in relation to where he was standing. He wasn't sure and his mind was a jumble of acute pain and his body burning, itching from lack of the narcotic.

"Think, Ailyn," he said aloud. "Think."

He was fairly sure the main lab was behind him so he forced his body around, expending even more energy that was waning fast. Sluggishly putting one foot ahead of the other, he began moving in that direction. His breathing was slow and labored, his lungs feeling singed from the high heat of his body.

He stopped and listened and thought he heard the sound of a refrigeration unit kicking in. He concentrated on the humming noise and was reassured he was going in the right direction. As he passed one of the rooms he saw a jumpsuit hanging on a peg and paused. Though his body was fevered, he was so cold his teeth were clicking together. The jumpsuit would help to warm him so he dredged up enough strength to detour into the room and drag the garment from the peg. It took him a long time to get it on and it was a bit too tight for him but it helped to block out the cold.

The lights had been left on in what he thought must be the lab and the brightness spilling out into the corridor from its open door began to hurt his sensitive eyes the closer he got to it. He was squinting against the glare but when he reached the room, he was relieved to see it was indeed the lab and sitting on the far wall was the massive refrigeration unit that was his goal.

Stumbling now for he was rapidly losing what energy he had left, he bumped into the lab tables, knocking beakers and flasks to the granite floor. He stepped on shards of broken glass—cutting his bare feet—but he didn't even notice. He was licking his dry lips, anticipating the Sustenance that waited on the other side of the thick stainless steel doors. By the time he reached them, he was giddy with need.

It took several tries before he was able to jerk open one of the doors and he whimpered when he saw the deep shelves bare. The next door revealed more empty space as did the third and the fourth. By the time he yanked the fifth of the six doors open, he was crying like a baby and so terrified he could barely stand. When the fifth door revealed neatly stacked beakers of Sustenance and boxes of vac-syringes filled

with what he prayed was tender, he sank to his knees in thanksgiving, burying his face in his hands as he sobbed.

The Sustenance called to him and his queen scraped along his backbone to remind him She was in need too. Though She did not hurt him, She was insistent and with the last of his rapidly draining strength, he managed to grab a beaker. He slumped down in front of the open refrigeration unit and drained the Sustenance, gulping the thick black liquid—some of it dripping from his lips to stain the beige jumpsuit. He finished that beaker and drank two more before he had even a semblance of energy to reach for a vac-syringe. Plunging it into his neck—barely reacting to the terrible burning of the thick med—he waited for the pain to subside, the withdrawal to ease, but it didn't.

"Not enough," he said, and fumbled for another vac-syringe. Once again he administered the caustic narcotic and felt just a twinge of relief. "Give it time, Ailyn. Give it time to work," he mumbled aloud.

As the last of his strength faded away, he slumped there with his chin to his chest, waiting for his world to be made right again.

* * * * *

"Eighteen life forms are on the ship," Quinn reported as he stood behind the com officer, reading his screen. "Six joining the ship's crew. Two Reaper heat signatures, one very weak."

"That's him, Sir," the com officer said, pointing to a very weak blip on the screen as it split, showing the facility on R-9.

"You'd better get in there stat, Rory," Leveche said. "Don't worry about shutting down alarms. Just get to him and bring him back up here." He looked at the other two *Scaans*. "Get over to that ship and disable their Web then get your asses back here pronto!"

"We're on it!" Quinn said, he and his men heading for the elevator.

"Throw the Net around that ship, Raoul. Don't let it leave," Leveche ordered his half brother.

"Can't," Breva reported over the vid-com. "They've got a clear tube all the way up."

"Could they know we're here?" Polemusa asked.

"No way," Bakari said. "Can we move a ship into position over them to block?"

"Negative," Breva replied. "We've got them surrounded but no one thought to block the airspace above them. They've got energy pulses shooting straight up to clear a path. Sorry, Gabe. My fault."

"Can we lock on to the hag and her little bastard?" Shanee asked. "That's all I care about. Get them on board and let the LRC fly. Shoot her down as she attempts to power up to hyper drive."

"Now that we can try," Breva stated. He asked for retinal IDs of the two Harmattans from the Coalition data banks so his engineer could lock on to mother and son and snatch them off the Ceannus ship.

"I want Cean," Bakari said. "Can you lock on to her slimy ass?"

"I doubt it unless you have a retinal for her," Breva replied.

"The gods-be-damn it, I don't!" Bakari said.

"Then you'll have to content yourself with blowing her to space dust when that ship attempts to leave R-9 airspace," Leveche advised.

"It's just not the same," the ex-Burgon complained. "I wanted to use my scytheblade on that bitch."

"Poor little guy," Leveche said, making a tutting sound. "There will be other people you can behead with your new little sword. Don't worry."

"They know we're here," the com officer reported. "It's chaos on their bridge."

"Are the *Scaans* over there yet?"

"Aye and the Web is powering down."

"Where is the bitch and her pup?" Polemusa asked.

"We're locking on to them...now!" Breva answered from the vid-com.

"Transport her to the gym," Shanee asked. "She's mine." She gave her mother a faint grin then turned and made for the elevator that would take her to engineering.

"What about the male?" Breva inquired.

"Send him on to the transport room. They'll take him into custody," Bakari replied. He frowned at Leveche. "Can't I just whittle him up a bit?"

"If it would make you happy, Ryden," Leveche said. "You don't need my permission. This is your ship."

Bakari's face lit up. "It is, isn't it?" He fingered the handle of the scytheblade at his waist.

* * * * *

Rory Quinn materialized in the corridor outside the main lab. He had slightly miscalculated but with all the alarms going off around him, he didn't think he'd done too badly. Hurrying into the lab, he made straight for Ailyn Harmattan, his heart thudding hard as he saw the Reaper collapsed on the floor.

Dropping down beside him, Quinn put two fingers to the carotid artery in the other man's neck and felt the faint pulse. He slapped his hand on the vid-com badge on his shirt. "I've got him but he's barely alive."

"Then hurry, Phantom!" Leveche ordered.

Quinn slipped his arms under Ailyn's legs and behind his back and lifted, grunting with the effort. He started to turn away when his *Scaan* sixth sense kicked in and

directed his attention to the bottles of Sustenance and vac-syringes in the refrigeration unit. Not one to dismiss the warning that was quivering down his spine, he knew he'd be back for samples.

"Lock and load, guys," he said. "I've got him!"

As he and his burden began to dematerialize, Quinn's gaze stayed on the opened refrigeration unit and the neatly arranged bottles of black blood.

* * * * *

Shanee knew the doors to the gymnasium were locked as she walked toward them. There would be no way for Elspeth Harmattan-Jost to leave. With the new acute hearing she now possessed, she could hear the other woman slapping her palms against the pneumatic doors, trying to make them open.

"Anything that could be used as a weapon has been evacuated from the room." Her mother's face suddenly appeared on the vid-com screen beside the main door into the gym.

"You didn't have to do that," Shanee said.

"It will be a fair fight," her mother replied. "May the Wind be at your back."

* * * * *

They were waiting for him as Quinn appeared on the transporter pad. A gurney had been rolled close and he hurried to lay Ailyn down. "I've got to go back. Something isn't right," the Phantom said before stepping back and disappearing again.

"Get him down to sickbay," Bakari said. He was stunned at the strange gray pallor that covered Ailyn Harmattan's face.

Leveche and Bakari were right behind the gurney as it was rolled into the elevator. On the way up the two decks to sickbay, they didn't speak but there was no need. They recognized impending death when they saw it.

The healer and his assistants took over charge of the gurney as soon as the elevator doors opened, grabbing the rolling bed and rushing into the diagnostic room with it.

"What I wouldn't give for one of those TAOS units off the *Sláinte*," the healer said, speaking of the Tissue Artery Organ Skeletal diagnostic and restoration unit he'd heard about.

"Wouldn't do any good with a Reaper," Leveche reminded him. "Only the hellion can heal him."

Quinn suddenly appeared next to the healer—effectively scaring the poor man. "Sorry," the *Scaan* apologized then thrust a beaker of the black blood and a vac-syringe at the healer. "You might want to analyze these. Something tells me they are tainted."

"Tainted how, Rory?" Bakari asked.

"With that gods-be-damned nephrotoxin," Leveche snarled. "I'd stake my kingdom on it!"

"You mean what's in here could be shutting down his kidneys?" the healer asked, handing the beaker to an assistant with a command to run it through analysis.

"Aye and if that's true, there's only one thing we can do about it," Leveche said. His hand went to his tie and he started jerking it from its knot.

"Ship's leaving, Burgon!" Polemusa said from the vid-com.

Bakari hesitated. He wanted to be there for Ailyn but he desperately wanted to make sure the Ceannus LRC was destroyed.

"Go," Leveche said. "There's nothing you can do to help right now." He was stripping off his shirt.

"You're going to give him one of your fledglings?" the healer asked.

"No," Leveche said with a grimace. "I'm going to give him my queen."

* * * * *

Shanee put her hand on the panel to slide the gym door open and strolled inside as though she had not a care in the world. Across the room, the woman she intended to kill was trying to find a way out. As soon as the Amazeen entered, Elspeth spun around, her face turning hard as flint.

"Well, if it isn't my son's whore," she hissed.

"Well, if it isn't my husband's soon-to-be-dead mother," Shanee flung back at her.

Elspeth sniffed and a slight hint of fear darted across her face as she recognized the Reaper scent. "Is he dead yet?" she asked, wanting to hurt the Amazeen.

Though those four words drove an ice-cold dagger of pain through her heart, Shanee forced herself not to react. "He's very much alive," she said.

The older woman laughed. "Oh I doubt that," she said, and began moving to the side, away from the advance of the unarmed Amazeen. "Cean took all his fledglings though she left the useless queen."

"The queen isn't as useless as you thought she was," Shanee said. She could feel the blood pounding in her temples.

"Cean didn't take the queen from him because it was dying," Elspeth declared. "Between the ghoret venom and the nephrotoxin, the hellion didn't stand a chance of surviving."

Shanee had to believe Leveche and Bakari would take care of her ailing husband. She could not afford to allow her opponent to put doubt—and fear—into her mind. Ailyn would be all right. His friends would save him. The important thing was to rid the megaverse of the likes of Elspeth Harmattan-Jost.

"Believe what you will, old woman," Shanee said. "Either way, you are toast."

Ailyn's mother's forehead furrowed for a moment then with teeth bared, she rushed Shanee – no doubt believing the element of surprise would be on her side.

* * * * *

"Your queen?" Bakari questioned, his mouth dropping open.

"Burgon?" Polemusa prodded. "Do you want to be on the bridge when we take Cean down or not?"

"I told you to go, Ry," Leveche said. He had removed his shirt and was motioning for a gurney to be rolled up so he could lie down. "I have to transfer my queen to him. That is the only way to save his life. Now get your ass up there and spray Cean into space particles."

"Removing your queen won't harm you?" the healer asked.

Leveche shook his head. "I'll be weak but the nest will choose another fledgling to be queen." He scowled at Bakari. "Get the hell out of here, Burgon!"

Bakari hesitated only a fraction of a second longer then sprinted into the open cage of the elevator. He saluted Leveche as the Reaper hopped up on the gurney.

"What do I need to do, your grace?" the healer asked.

"You'll need to make a twelve-inch-long cut from kidney to kidney on both of us. Take my queen first then open him and remove his. Scoop out as much of Her as you can because I imagine She'll be disintegrating by now. Place my queen in him and then stand back. She'll close up the wound."

"The Sustenance is laced with nephrotoxin," the healer's assistant reported. "So is the tenerse."

"I'll go back down and destroy all of it," Quinn said. "Do you have extra for him, Gabe?"

"Aye, there's plenty on board," the Reaper replied as the healer began swabbing his back with an astringent.

"Do you want me to put you out?" the healer asked.

"Not necessary," Leveche said. "Just get on with it!"

* * * * *

Bakari sat down in his command chair just as the Ceannus LRC began its ascent. He asked if the *Scaans* had returned to the *Raptor* and was assured they had. "Open a channel to that bitch's ship," he ordered.

"They are blocking us," the com officer replied.

"We're locked on them, Burgon," the weapons officer told him.

"Then blast their reptilian tails out of my sky!" Bakari hissed.

As soon as the harsh flare lit the vid-com screen and the percussion wave rocked the *Raptor*, the ex-Burgon watched until the last flicker of debris was gone. "Are you sure Cean was on board?"

"We're sure," Polemusa said.

"Where is the hag's son?" he asked.

"In a holding cell," the security chief replied.

"Is Shanee finished yet?"

"Not yet," Polemusa answered. "If I know my daughter, she'll prolong that bitch's death for as long as possible and make her suffer as much as she can."

"Well," Bakari said, settling into his chair. "Let me know when she's finished and then send the pup to the gym. Give him a sword. We want to make it a fair fight."

Polemusa snorted. Like everyone else on the bridge, she knew there would never be a fair fight between a Fleet Command ensign and a full-fledged scythelord, but it didn't matter. Felix Harmattan's life was forfeit.

* * * * *

Elsbeth fought tooth and nail but nothing she did seemed to faze the Amazeen. Wounds closed automatically and the younger woman inflicted just as much damage as her opponent but it took the older woman longer to heal.

"You hurt him," Shanee said, crouched over and circling her enemy. "You caused him so much pain all his life."

"I never wanted him," Elspeth said. "Any of them." She feigned grabbing Shanee's leg then skipped away, out of reach as the Amazeen reached for her.

"You signed his death warrant," Shanee accused, a muscle grinding in her jaw.

"Not once but twice," Elspeth agreed with a grin. "And I agreed to have him tortured by Cean and her scientists."

Shanee knew the other woman was attempting to make her lose her concentration, to make her angry and thus allow her control to slip.

"Didn't work either time," Shanee said with a snort. "He's stronger than you could ever have imagined."

"Oh he's dead by now," Elspeth declared. "Felix would have seen to that."

"No way, old woman," Shanee said. "He's got a new queen."

Elsbeth faltered. "That's a lie!"

Shanee didn't know how she knew what was happening to her husband but she suspected it was because the fledgling queen growing inside her had come from Leveche's queen and they were communicating in some fashion. She also knew Leveche would do whatever was needed to save Ailyn's life.

"He and I will be around when you are ashes floating in the wind," Shanee said.

With a furious snarl, Elspeth flung herself at Shanee, changing in mid-leap to her lupine form. She never heard the laugh that erupted from the Amazeen's throat as Shanee threw her arms around the furry form and clasped it to her in a savage bear hug.

Jaws snapping, fangs dripping, enraged howls and snarls issuing from her throat, Elspeth struggled to pierce her claws as forcefully as she could into Shanee's shoulders. Her back legs raked at the younger woman's thighs—drawing blood and shredding flesh—but still the deadly embrace kept Elspeth imprisoned. Her head was turned to the side and held taut against the Amazeen's chest, Shanee's arms crossed behind the older woman, her hands on Elspeth's neck so she could not snare Shanee with her fangs.

Shanee tightened her grip on the furry neck. She wanted to snap the wolf's neck and knew she could. "*Wait,*" came the silent command from her hellion.

Elspeth realized her strength was waning and she changed back to her human form, but the change wasn't as quick as it should have been. She was still trapped in Shanee's arms with her neck in a lethal grip.

"Wait."

Shanee unlocked her arms and stepped back. She hurt in twenty places where claws had poked into her flesh but that didn't matter. The wounds were healing quickly and the older woman in front of her was breathing heavily, panting, staggering backward.

"Ailyn and I will be around when you are ashes floating in the wind," Shanee said again.

Elspeth leapt at her only to find her neck gripped fiercely between the younger woman's hands. She raked her nails along the black silk clad arms of the female Reaper, tried kicking out at her, but the grip on her neck tightened until she saw stars. She gagged, her queen buckled beneath the skin of her back to cause hideous pain that weakened her further.

"Now."

With a twist of her hands, Shanee broke Elspeth's neck then stepped back to allow the body to fall. She drew her phospho gun and not even bothering with anything else, hit the direct discharge button, and simply turned the old woman into so much black dust. Though she was watching closer, the queen never tried to escape. It too was reduced to soot.

* * * * *

Leveche was in agony as his queen was pulled from his back and he lay there with his hands curled around the sides of the gurney. He was dragging in heated breaths as he watched the healer drop the queen into a large beaker then hurry to Ailyn to open the incision on the younger Reaper's back.

"Hurry," Leveche warned. He could feel the life force leaving Ailyn.

Incision made, the healer staggered back from the horrid stench that erupted from Ailyn's body along with a copious amount of a putrid green jell-like substance.

"Get it out of him," Leveche said. His own strength was waning and he knew unconsciousness was but a heartbeat away as his nest took over closing his wound and electing a new hellion to control him.

Scooping out the foul matter, suctioning the rest, the healer made quick work of cleaning the fetid debris from Ailyn's back. As soon as he was sure he had almost all of it, he dropped Leveche's queen onto the young man's back.

At first the queen balked – sensing the putrid death of one of Her kind. She sniffed at the wound, reared up like a cobra for a moment, hovering there with Her head bobbing back and forth.

"Save him."

The queen snapped Her triangular head around and stared at the woman who had come into the room.

"Please," Shanee asked. "He is one of Yours."

Moving so fast no one saw it happened, the hellion wedged Herself into the wound and disappeared. The flesh of Ailyn's back buckled in several places then subsided, accompanied by his low groan. Almost instantly, the incision closed up and sealed Her inside the Reaper.

Shanee glanced over at Leveche and could tell he was out of it. His eyes were closed and one arm was hanging limply off the edge of the gurney on which he was lying. She walked over to him and gently picked his arm up to place it beside his head.

"Are you all right?" Quinn asked, coming to her side to put an arm around her shoulders. He had seemingly dropped down out of the thin air. He looked down at her uniform that was ripped in places and was dark with expended blood.

"I will be," she said.

He hugged her to him. "Did I tell you the Elfinish is expecting?" he asked.

She nodded wearily, her head sagging to her chest.

"Did I also tell you Munchkin wishes for you to be the Keeper of the Offspring?"

Shanee lifted her head. "Are you just saying that, Phantom?" she asked.

"No," Quinn replied. "She and Dasher made the decision together. They feel you will make a good servant to the young one."

Giddy elation filled Shanee's weary body and she hugged Quinn back. "I am honored," she said. "I am so honored."

"Well, better you be the young one's servant than Kenni and me," he grumbled. "One Elfinish is one too many in my household sometimes."

"Boy or girl?" Bakari inquired as he joined them.

"Munch says it will be a girl," Quinn replied.

"A female," Shanee breathed. "Oh by the gods, I am doubly blessed."

"Blessed by what?" Polumusa asked. She was never too far from the ex-Burghon's side.

"Quinn's Elfinish is pregnant and she is gracing me with her offspring," Shanee said. "A female!"

"Oh my," Polumusa said. "That is indeed a blessing."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Quinn growled. "Whatta blessing."

"A name!" Polumusa said. "You must pick an appropriate name for a Worldly One."

"Gabrielle."

Everyone turned to find Ailyn's eyes open. His voice had been weak when he spoke. "She'll be Gabrielle," he repeated, smiled tiredly and then fell into a painless, healing sleep.

Shanee leaned over him and smoothed his tousled hair back from his forehead. "His body temperature is lower."

"We have Gabe to thank for that," Bakari stated.

"Gabrielle," Polumusa said. "Aye, and it is appropriate, I believe."

"He's going to be fine," the healer told Shanee as he looked up at the diagnostic panel. "His breathing is much easier and his heartbeat is stronger. The proof he is on the road to good health will come when he begins to urinate."

"We came to tell you that your mother will be leaving us on Brevia's ship," Bakari said. "And I've a small matter to take care of in a few minutes."

"Why are you leaving, Mother?" Shanee asked. "I was hoping you would stay to help me care for Ailyn."

Polumusa lifted her chin. "It was reported to us that the identity of the second person who contracted for your death has been discovered," she said. "I will be making a visit to that person."

"That's my right," Shanee said.

"No," her mother disagreed. "It is mine. The culprit is your Aunt Molpadia. I will call her out and we will end this feud between us. The Council of Elders will be shocked to learn what their domestic queen is capable of doing and will want to execute her but that is my right. She will die at my hand and no other's."

"But why?" Shanee asked. "Why would she want me dead?"

"To hurt me," Polumusa answered. "It is my belief that during my grieving period, she would have struck to eliminate me. Alone, weaponless on the Plains of Memory, I would have been defenseless against her were she to come with *Dóigra* in hand. There is no honor in my sister and she brings disgrace to the Iphito name."

Shanee saw Bakari leaving. "You have my gratitude, Burghon," she said.

He waved a hand but did not turn around. He was anxious to remove the last obstacle to Ailyn Harmattan's future happiness.

"I'll be leaving with Breva too," Quinn told Shanee. "If you ever need me, you know where I am."

"I know you were going to stay here in Leveche's stronghold," her mother said. "But we don't think that's a good idea with Ailyn having been so close to death. You should go back to Riezell with the healer just in case."

Shanee's shoulders slumped. "Aye, I think you're right." She looked up as her two Class 10s came lumbering into the sickbay. She gave the larger of the two an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Primä One," she said. "I know you wanted to tear apart those Ceannus 'bots."

The Class 10 'bot nodded. "Another time, milady," it declared.

"You may stand down," she said. "I'm afraid you make him nervous."

Quinn snorted. "Them? They're pussycats, aren't you, Primä One?"

"Unless we are rolling downhill, milord," the 'bot said then chuckled, startling everyone in the room. It nodded again then pivoted around and with its partner close behind shuffled from the room.

"Did you program those 'bots with humor?" Polemusa asked her daughter.

"I'm trying to make them more Ailyn-friendly," Shanee answered. "He is uneasy around them."

"That could be because Cean used them to torture him," Quinn said. "Give him time, Shanee. He'll come to like those 'bots as much as I do."

"Let's get going, Phantom," Polemusa said. "My sword hand is itching and you look as though you are having Elfinish withdrawal."

Quinn's eyebrows shot up. "Another Amazeen with a sense of humor? The gods preserve us! What is the megaverse coming to?"

"Tell the Burgon I'll be seeing him," Polemusa said.

"I'm sure he'll be interested to hear that," Leveche mumbled as he struggled to sit up on the gurney. "Steady as she goes, Rory."

Quinn saluted the Reaper then with Polemusa walking ahead of him, got into the elevator.

"Are you okay?" Shanee asked.

"I hurt like hell but that's to be expected," Leveche said. He slumped on the gurney. "Thought I could stand up but I'm thinking better of that notion." He looked over at Ailyn. "How's he doing?"

"Healing," Shanee told him. "Sleeping easily."

"Good," Leveche said then heaved a long sigh. "I was worried."

"You should worry about the Burgon," she said. "I believe my mother has him in her sights."

Leveche shrugged. "Won't do her any good. Ry's heart is well on the way to being claimed."

* * * * *

Ryden Bakari sheathed his scythesword, took one last look at the body of the man he had executed then left the gymnasium, kicking at the black ashes that were sprinkled in his path. He went to his private quarters, locked the door then stripped out of his black uniform and climbed into a piping hot shower that washed away the day's accumulation of death and destruction.

He had no regrets about the deaths that had been dealt on his ship or those that had ended on the Ceannus LRC. He did regret however, not being able to take Perse Cean's life himself. Her evil had deserved more pain, more retribution, than an instantaneous flash of fire and exploding body parts.

Lowering his head, he let the water drum down on his tired muscles. Tomorrow, he would once more set out on his quest to find Riordan O'Shay and bring the bastard to justice. It was the one goal he had set for himself that he would follow until one of them was dead – and he had no intention of being the one to depart first.

His thick salt-and-pepper hair clinging to the sides of his face, he straightened up and raked his hands through the soggy mass. The scar on the side of his face tingled as it usually did when his thoughts turned murderous. Vaguely he heard the vid-com chime on and turned to look out the glass side of the shower.

"Burgon?"

It was *her* sweet, melodic voice and he quickly reached for the shower handles to stop the water. With his heart in his throat, he opened the door and – not even thinking – hurried over to the screen.

"Aye, dearling? Is something wrong?"

Her brown eyes lowered and he realized he was standing before her stark naked.

"Nothing is wrong. You are well, Sir?"

"I am," he said, and forced himself to stand still and not try to hide his bare body from her view. He wanted her to see him. He wanted her to know what he could offer her.

She lifted her gaze and it seemed to burn into him as it wandered slowly over his flesh. She did not blush – she'd seen a man's genitals before. Nor did she look away.

"Will you be leaving tomorrow in search for your quarry?" she asked as she met his heated gaze.

"Aye," he replied, and felt his heart racing.

"Then stay safe, milord, and hurry home," she said. "May the Wind be at your back."

"And at yours, dearling," he whispered.

Then she was gone and the brightness and peace that was slowly filtering back into his dark world fled with her.

Epilogue

Shanee had come to the conclusion that all men were alike. None of them had ever outgrown his childhood and would revert to it at the most irritating times. Stubborn, obstinate, willful, inflexible—all were adjectives to describe a male's inability to see reason.

"Ailyn..." she warned, her head tilted to one side.

"No."

"Ailyn..." she warned again.

"No."

He was clinging to the bedpost and the thought went through her mind that she should tackle him, put his ass back in bed and tie him down, but the mulish pout on his lips was so comical she was having a hard time not laughing.

"You are not supposed to be up," she reminded him.

"I have to pee, Shanee," he complained.

"I'll hold the urinal..." she began, but he was thrashing his head back and forth in denial.

"I want to pee in the toilet," he said. "I *will* pee in the toilet and I'll do it on my own. My piss is going in the toilet this time!"

"Well, most of it anyway," she mumbled. Like all women, she knew it was virtually impossible for a man to get all his urine in the toilet.

"I am going into the bathroom," he pronounced, and let go of the bedpost. He wobbled, staggered a bit but he managed to get into the bathroom without toppling over.

Shanee had to be content to straighten his covers, fluff his pillow and wait for him to come out so she could wipe up the floor behind him. When he came back, he scrambled into the bed without being told to and turned over on his side.

"I'm ready," he said.

She reached for the vac-syringe and quickly gave him his morning tenerse, wincing with him as the potent, fiery med coursed down the vein in his neck. She waited until he had turned over to his back and scooted up in the bed before adjusting the covers over him.

"I am so fucking tired of lying in this bed," he complained as he took the glass of Sustenance she had waiting for him.

"Another few days according to Tariq's instructions and you can be up and about," she said. "Not today. Not tomorrow, but the day after."

She watched him silently mimicking her words before he drained the glass then held it out to her like the little boy of whom he so forcefully reminded her.

"Did Primä One give you your tenerse?" he asked.

"Primä Two did. I sent Primä One on an errand."

"Scaring the damned people in the neighborhood no doubt," he grumbled.

Her lips twitched but she made no comment to his moody remark.

"Where are you going?" he asked as she turned to leave.

"I have an appointment with General Strom," she replied. "Primä Two will be here if you..."

"I'm not talking to that 'bot," he snapped. "You tell him to stay the hell away from me." He narrowed his eyes. "Why are you going to Command Central? What's going on?"

"I'm taking a few months leave," she said.

"You?" he asked, his eyes wide. "Why?"

"So we can go back to Theristes for a while," she replied. "I'd like to see Tariq and Bahiya, see how Jules is doing with his 'bot."

He seemed to relax. "Can't you come lie down with me until I fall asleep?" he asked. The dose of tenerse also contained a bit of pairilis to help him rest. Already he was getting groggy.

"Just for a minute," she said, and went over to her side of the bed and climbed in, stretching out beside him.

He put his head on her shoulder and was quiet for so long she thought he'd fallen to sleep but just as she started to get up, he said, "He wasn't with her."

Shanee frowned. "Who, *ehemann*?"

"Acklard," he said. "He wasn't with her on R-9 and he's out there doing the gods only know what."

She knew that preyed on his mind. He had suggested they ask Strom if they could be assigned to find Acklard and the other Ceannus, to put an end to their reign of potential terror.

"They're still looking for Chiaroscuro," she said. "When they find it, we'll go after him."

"And kill the bastard who hurt me," he said, his voice muffled by the drug.

"Aye, and kill the bastard who hurt you."

She heard his breathing slow and knew he was asleep. She eased his head from her shoulder and bent over to kiss his brow.

He was such a handsome man and her heart and soul belonged entirely to him.

Tomorrow would be time enough to tell him about the baby growing inside her.

About the Author

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 40 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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